In The Flesh

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In The Flesh

by janebled

Summary

5/16/15: Updated w/more detailed RST in Chapter 8. Aw, yeah.

Story synopsis: As he sets an elaborate trap for the diabolical Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham struggles to keep his dark impulses from overpowering him. In and out of dreams, he pushes himself to the limit when he gains access to Hannibal's inner machinations. Meanwhile, Hannibal falls for Will (and his elaborate ruse) hook, line, & sinker. The snake persues the mongoose, but the mongoose invites it: a mutual courtship is established. Will pays for its consummation, while Hannibal collects the spoils of his victory.

Main Pairing: Hannibal/Will (romantic undertones, but no actual sex - though that doesn't mean they don't get it on). All boundaries between Hannibal and Will inevitably disappear; their love-beyond-friendship evolves from the forces of "fate and circumstance."

NBC's ***Hannibal*** is my current favorite TV show. The following fanfic is my loving tribute to the fascinating world originally designed by Thomas Harris, and masterfully envisioned by Bryan Fuller and his team of creative colleagues. The characters, the Season 2 plotline, and the events/dialogue from "Mizumono" are not mine.

Notes

*Extended edition - 5000 more words, new scenes, and extra Hannigram moments. If you've already read the story and enjoyed it, reading it again can't hurt - especially considering the lovely new embellishments.

whispers And the touching...

Sincere thanks for your time - I hope you enjoy my interpretation of Will Graham's descent into the darkness of his own mind.

See the end of the work for more notes

Prologue

Chapter Summary

> Will fantasizes about using his hands to kill Hannibal. Begins around the timeline of S2E10 (“Naka-Choko”).

Hannibal: I gave you a rare gift, but you didn't want it.

Will: Didn't I?

- *Hannibal* (Season 2, "Mizumono")

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Restless beneath the full moon’s spell, the stag pawed at the forest floor; unearthing bits of dirt with its powerful front hooves. Light emanated from the center of the clearing where it stood. Snorting, the beast reared its glossy head around to face its adversary. The challenge in its body language was implicit.

Reaching out, Will grasped the stag’s stiff antlers with both hands. Instead of rebuking his touch, the beast let out a whispery sigh, and leaned into him. Will trembled, but not from fear. The long-awaited moment of reckoning was finally upon him.

Behind him, a familiar voice whispered, "Look at me."

Will whipped around to view the speaker. Before him was not the macabre visage of the Hannibal-stag hybrid who often haunted his nightmares of late, but the murderous doctor himself. Without having to turn around, Will sensed that the stag had vanished. He stared into Hannibal's face, allowing himself to feel the full force of the rage he had suppressed during his incarceration.

Hannibal squared his shoulders; eyes brimming with dark suggestion.

“What are you waiting for?” he challenged. “Kill me.”

Will’s hands automatically clenched into fists. Lunging, he pushed Hannibal to the ground and straddled him. Hannibal didn’t attempt to fight back. Instead, he relaxed his muscles; never tearing his eyes away from Will's. Hannibal’s body was firm and warm beneath his weight. Will grunted in appreciation. Without hesitating, he wrapped his hands around his enemy’s throat. He squeezed, hard and fast; until Hannibal's windpipe collapsed. Will could feel their two heartbeats at once: his own raced, as Hannibal’s decelerated. Through a curtain of black and red, Will increased the pressure of his grip. Hannibal’s face purpled. Breathing fast, Will pressed closer, and strangled him with all of his strength.

As his heart slowed to a stop, Hannibal seemed to smile. Will grinned back. Hannibal’s eyes glazed over; Will felt a potent release when his nemesis succumbed to his mortality. For the last time, they were as one.

Panting, Will rolled to the side and pressed his ear against Hannibal’s slack mouth. He stayed in that position until he was sure all the breath had left his prey. Hannibal's eyes, still half-open, stared without sight. Will sat up and carefully observed his handiwork; captivated by the fitting balance of composition Hannibal's moon-bathed corpse imbued to the idyllic forest scenery. Lunar light bathed the land in an eerie juxtaposition of brightness and shadow. The wind moaned softly through the trees, inviting the darkness to stay.

Will’s predator’s heart rejoiced at the feeling of power taking Hannibal’s life gave him. His evil delight was shameless; without remorse. By murdering his closest enemy, Will's design had finally taken shape.

Immersion

Chapter Summary

Hannibal reflects upon the spoils of his victory at Will's expense, while Will ponders how to gain deeper trust from the charming monster who used to be his therapist.

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Hannibal reveled in bringing his human art project to life. Every stroke of the brush, skillfully rendered, painted his mind's canvas with the image of his ideal murderous companion. Within Will's fragile psyche was the potential to self-destruct, and arise from the ashes like a phoenix with outstretched wings.

Will Graham was the beloved muse Hannibal had never known he was missing - until the morning he fed him his first bite of human sausage, and watched him relish the flavor. How eagerly Will had chewed the meat before it passed smoothly down his esophagus and into his waiting stomach; how he had beamed at the unexpected taste; how his lovely smile of appreciation had stirred Hannibal's unflappable composure. In that moment, he had glimpsed the dark potential lurking below Will's guise of boyish, lingering innocence.

Not only physically appealing, Will possessed an alluring purity of soul. When shadows called to him, and he answered without the shudder of fear that was typical of most people. He had *seen* Hannibal, and not looked away. The idea that someone might finally know him was too intoxicating a notion for Hannibal to abandon. He possessed enough self-awareness to recognize that he was, as Dr. Du Maurier had keenly observed, obsessed with Will Graham. Nevertheless, he firmly believed that he remained in control of his infatuation.

When Hannibal needed inspiration for implementing the next phase of his seduction, he drew it directly from the source. The long-ago moment in Garret Jacob Hobbs' kitchen, when Hannibal saw firsthand the bloodshed of which Will was capable, played on a loop inside the cavernous inner chambers of his grand mansion of memories. Will's recent offering of Randall Tier now crowded his thoughts; earning the distinction of being the happiest memory in Hannibal's recent past.

His fingertips tingled: he still felt them passing over the soft, raw tissue from Will's wounded knuckles. It had taken more than Hannibal's usual amount of self-restraint to keep from licking the blood clean. He would have gladly his muse's offering of Randall Tier with more intimate gestures of affection, but he knew that Will would not have allowed him to break that particular barrier between them. At least, not yet. Resigned to patience, he had tended to Will's wounds in a more socially-acceptable fashion; secretly admiring the resplendent red marks of devotion.

With a rueful smile, Hannibal strode over to his harpsichord, ready to work on his latest composition. He propped open the lid, and then smoothed back the pages of the handwritten score displayed on the music desk. Closing his eyes, he bowed his head over the instrument, blindly caressing the keys with a lover's touch. He allowed his thoughts to take him where they might. As he fingered the notes, the music of his composition transported him to another dimension.

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In his mind's eye, Hannibal envisioned Will, bathed in blood; hunching down on a thick carpet of pine needles. Randall Tier's modified corpse, mounted on in the middle of forest clearing, watched over them. The sights and scents of nature filled Hannibal's nose.

He knelt down next to Will, and smoothed his matted hair.

"You have never been more beautiful to me," he whispered, gently unsnarling the tangles from his blood-sticky curls.

Will looked up at him. "Are you pleased?"

The whites of his eyes starkly contrasted with his scarlet-stained skin.

Lovingly, Hannibal gazed at him. "'Pride goeth before a fall.'

Will averted his eyes.

"That being said," Hannibal continued, "I'm delighted by your progress."

"What comes next?" Will murmured.

"That remains to be seen."

Will turned on his focus on Randall Tier. "This can't be the end."

"It never has to end," Hannibal responded. He took his hand away from Will's hair and regarded his blood-soaked fingertips. Drawing the tip of his thumb into his mouth, he tasted it. The iron tang of life filled him with joy. He licked his skin again, seeking more satisfaction.

Will stood up and took Hannibal's thumb into his own mouth. With a quiet whimper, he savored Randall's blood as he sucked it from the flesh like marrow from a bone.

"So this is what triumph tastes like," he murmured, releasing Hannibal's hand.

"You can't even begin to imagine what new flavors await your altered palate," Hannibal whispered against the shell of his ear.

Standing side by side, Hannibal and Will regarded Randall with quiet reverence; relishing the victim they shared.

Will touched his sleeve. “I’m looking forward to drafting our next piece,” he whispered.

As his partner admired Randall Tier’s display, Hannibal schemed in confidence about their promising future together.

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Hannibal’s quickened pulse returned him to the present. Savoring the fantasy a moment longer, he eased more deeply into the music of the harpsichord. Enraptured, he allowed his mind to drift into oblivion as he reached the song's climax. On the resounding final chord, his fingers left the keys with a flourish. The last shivery note suspended in the desire-thickened air.

After taking a moment to recover from the emotion his playing always exerted, Hannibal bowed to an empty audience; then strode over to the desk to pick up his phone. His pulse was still racing. Dialing Alana’s number, Hannibal forced himself to breathe normally.

“Hello?” Alana’s voice was husky.

“I was wondering if you’d like to help me with my composition.”

Alana sounded surprised. “Now?”

“If you have the time.”

She paused for a moment; then gave a sexy laugh. "Why not? It's been too long since we worked on the last one.”

“Indeed,” Hannibal replied. “I’ll expect you in a half hour then.”

Without waiting for her response, he hung up the phone and loosened his tie. A little company from an eager subject might inspire him to orchestrate the next phase in Will’s transformation.

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Trailing kisses down Alana's neck, Hannibal paused for a moment at the jugular. Her pulse throbbed seductively. Gently suckling on the skin, he took a deep whiff of her lilac scent and let it fill him. Moaning softly, she tangled her fingers in his hair, mussing it. Her aggressive touch ignited a slow burn in his core. Tearing his lips away from her neck, he stared into her striking blue eyes and stroked the curve of her waist.

Hannibal felt no twinge of the guilt over having an affair with Alana. Though she was Will’s erstwhile love interest, Hannibal could see that the two of them would never have a chance. Alana thought she understood Will, but that was her illusion. In reality, she couldn’t be further from gleaning the truth about his behavior. That was a privilege Will only afforded to Hannibal.

“Where are you right now?” Alana suddenly asked. The worry in her voice was apparent.

“Wherever you are,” he smoothly responded.

Alana gave him a doubtful smile. “Are you sure I’m the one who’s occupying your thoughts?”

He placed a soothing kiss on her lips. “Who else could occupy my thoughts, with such a vision of beauty before my eyes?”

Dragging his tongue across her collarbone, he found the spot that made her gasp.

“You’re so receptive,” he whispered.

Alana closed her eyes. “You’re not giving me much of a choice.”

He parted her smooth thighs and delighted at what he found between them. Alana sighed in complicity. Tendrils of wavy black hair alighted upon her shoulders like wings. Hannibal studied her, truly pleased by her appearance. She gasped; firm breasts heaving with desire and anticipation.

He wondered what Will would do in a situation like this. Would he tenderly caress her, or paw at her with desperate hands? Would he stare into her eyes as she mounted him, or would he take from behind, forcing her to face away so that he didn’t have to remember her betrayal? Both were fascinating images to ponder and dissect at length.

A sudden premonition of Alana’s dying moment came into him; insinuated itself with sly stealth. Closing his eyes, he heard her gasp her last breath as he squeezed it from her. He would make a transcendent tableau to capture the moment of her stunning death.

For many reasons, Hannibal smiled. With a wry quirk of his lips, he descended into Alana’s welcoming arms; inwardly gloating as he took from her the satisfaction that Will's friendship afforded him.

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Will wanted to remember what remorse felt like. The world around him was cold without it. Hannibal had taken everything from him, and given nothing in return, save a purer understanding of the evil, and an infinite list of regrets. He was not sorry that Randall Tier was dead, but the images of mutilating his corpse haunted Will's nightmares.

Randall's dismemberment had proved to be messy, exhausting, and mentally disturbing. When Will had finally stepped back to behold his art, however, a perverse sort of pride bubbled up inside him. He didn’t want to dwell on the implications of his reaction for too long, lest he lose sight of his quest to incarcerate the depraved Dr. Lecter.

Will winced. His hand still ached from beating Randall to death. The healing wounds on his knuckles throbbed. In the moment, he hadn’t felt any discomfort from his destruction. Later, however, after Hannibal had carefully bathed his wounds and offered him seemingly honest words of comfort, the wounds had started to pain him. He briefly closed his eyes, recalling

the watery iron scent of his own blood collecting in the warm bowl of water. Hannibal's touch had been firm, yet light; relaxing; perversely soothing.

With a dry swallow, Will knocked on Dr. Lecter's door. It was time for his postmortem therapy session. Although the two of them had briefly spoken the night he killed Randall Tier, Hannibal had insisted they discuss the incident in further detail at Will's next appointment.

"Catharsis is necessary to heal the wounds of the soul," he had said.

Will could admit that Hannibal probably wasn't wrong about that. He cocked his ears, listening for the doctor's approach. After less than moment, the door opened. Will stared at the charming monster he had unwittingly befriended. As always, Hannibal was dressed impeccably from head to toe. His suit was a rich shade of burgundy; his cravat perfectly knotted; the lines of his body smooth and lean beneath his perfectly-tailored appearance. Will felt the familiar twinge of reluctant admiration at how well he looked.

Hannibal smiled warmly. "Please come in."

Will strode inside with purpose.

“Do you have any of the hard stuff?” he asked. He looked around the room, hoping to find the drink cart.

“Always,” Hannibal affirmed. Closing the door, he walked over to the corner of the office and brought out the pecan-colored bar cart; rolling it carefully along the floor so as not to upset the glasses. As if from thin air, he brandished a bottle of expensive-looking Scotch and two Copita nosing glasses.

“Lagavulin 16 - one of my favorite Scotch whiskies," Hannibal said. "Some connoisseurs would argue that it’s the ultimate Islay malt.”

With habitual panache, Hannibal opened the bottle. "Neat?"

"What do recommend?"

"Chillng the whisky dilutes the taste."

"No sense in doing that."

Hannibal poured Will a generous shot of Lagavulin. Their fingertips brushed as Will accepted the drink. Hannibal decanted a healthy dram of Scotch into his own glass and took a seat in the chair across from Will. Firelight enhanced the alluring angles of his slightly flushed face.

The endless waiting silence stretched between them. Taking a sip of the Lagavulin, Will leaned back against the chair’s padded headrest and closed his eyes. The smoky-sweet spirits coated his throat with pleasant warmth. He picked at something invisible on his sleeve, a habit from his former self—the Will Graham that neither kept the company of cannibals, nor enjoyed their camaraderie.

“How do you find the Lagavulin?” Hannibal prompted, silently gauging his reaction.

Will flicked his tongue over his bottom lips to catch the remaining drops of Scotch. “It’s sinfully palatable.”

Hannibal stared into his eyes. “Like murder?”

Will took another sip. “Once you acquire a taste for it...”

“You’re loath to give it up,” Hannibal finished. He swirled the whisky around in his glass, letting it coat the sides. Narrowing his eyes, he assessed the color and texture of the alcohol. Seemingly pleased, he nodded his approval, and passed the glass beneath his nose, inhaling the Scotch’s aroma.

Hannibal took a long, slow sip of Lagavulin and let it linger in his mouth. His eyes closed in enjoyment.

“Thick…rich…huge finish. I find its boldness inspiring. The ideal nightcap to complement an intimate tête-à-tête.”

Will felt the corners of his mouth tugging into a smile, and decided to let it happen. He was simultaneously restless and relaxed; all the while, aware of his role as the lure. The position he found himself in was uncomfortably precarious, but he couldn’t deny the certain thrill he experienced whenever delicately extracting more incriminating testimony from Hannibal.

“Relax, Will.”

Will side-eyed him. “That’s impossible.”

“Everything will turn out well in the end.”

“You don’t know that.”

“For a man who specializes in empathy, you’re woefully lacking in it of yourself.”

“I can’t change that.”

“Really?” Hannibal asked. “You’ve altered your behavior since I met you.”

“I was sick when you met me.”

“You were closed when you met me. I enlightened you.”

“No offense, Dr. Lecter,” Will said, gritting his teeth, “but I don’t care for your method of enlightenment.”

“Whether or not you appreciate my involvement in your journey to self-awareness is irrelevant. My methods have helped you discover hidden truths. You're open to new possibilities.”

Will took a gulp of his drink. “I’m not sure I care for the freedom.”

“You’d rather be behind bars?”

Will didn’t answer.

“Do you not appreciate how I helped you return to the outside world?"

Will glared at him. “I’ll never forget that you’re the one who put me there."

Hannibal pursed his lips. "A necessary evil."

"Months of suffering…biding my time in relative silence, everyone believing I was a killer..." Will trailed off, plagued by unpleasant memories. "I couldn’t erase what you’d done - who you were - from my brain.”

“I never wanted to you to suffer. I always planned come to your assistance when the timing was right."

"How convenient for you."

Hannibal swirled his Scotch. "Best not to dwell on the past, Will. We live in the present."

“I admire your skill." Will gestured to his nearly empty glass. "You always seem to know which drink will suit the atmosphere even before you’ve grown accustomed to it.”

Hannibal took another languid sip. "Something else is plaguing you, Will. Doubt has a distinctly sour odor. It’s biting - astringent.”

Will watched Hannibal lick traces of Lagavulin from his lips. The amber liquid clung to his sensuous lower mouth before his tongue caught the last few droplets. Averting his eyes, Will forced his facial muscles not to tense.

“It’s in your best interest to reveal your doubts,” Hannibal insisted.

Will laughed humorlessly. “Since when do you have my best interest at heart?”

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed. “Since I decided to make you privy to my inner machinations. It’s not a privilege that is easily afforded. Perhaps you should take care as to how you comport yourself.”

Will tensed. When Hannibal made vaguely sinister statements like that, he almost doubted his fishing ability.

“This psychological venture of yours,” Hannibal mused. His eyes glittered over the top of the nosing glass. “It’s a foray into the dark unknown. The intimate conversation you’re having with your demons presents imminent danger to your current self-perception.”

Will rolled Lagavulin around on his tongue for a moment before swallowing.

“And what is my current self-perception?” he responded.

“You see yourself as a victim. You’re inclined to believe your actions are the byproduct of the trauma you’ve endured.”

Will gritted his teeth. “The trauma you forced me to endure.”

Hannibal raised his eyebrows. “It’s our first instinct to blame others when the undercurrent of guilt runs thickly through our consciousness.”

“You’re as guilty as I am. More so, even.”

Hannibal drummed his fingers on the mahogany chair in a rare display discomfort. “Yes, to a certain extent, I suppose I do feel a semblance of guilt.”

“But do you feel remorse?” Will persisted, working his way inside Hannibal’s mind. It felt like his own when he stepped over the threshold.

Hannibal gestured with his glass. “Remorse is one of the most humane facets of emotion. That being said, excess emotion impedes the mechanism of logical thought. It’s a weakness.”

Will didn’t even flinch at the sting of Hannibal’s smug certainty when he uttered his presumption about the human condition. Leisurely, he took a swallow of his drink. He had been playing the game for so long; it was no longer a stretch of the imagination to think like a psychopath.

“Do you know what I think would benefit you, Will?”

Hannibal’s question caught Will off guard.

“What?” he asked.

“I want you to relive the moment you killed Randall Tier.”

Ill at ease, Will frowned. “I don’t see what good that would do. I put him in the past, you got what you wanted. As usual.”

Hannibal quirked his lips into a tight smile. “You sound hurt.”

“Bitter, maybe.”

Hannibal steepled his fingers, considering Will's statement. After a slight pause, he remarked, “Bitterness stems from hurt."

Grinning, Will bared his teeth. “Then I guess I’m guilty as charged.”

Hannibal pursed his lips and looked to the side. “Do you know why I sent Randall after you?”

Will smirked. “Curiosity killed the cat.”

“Yes, but beyond that, I was intrigued,” Hannibal replied. “I see great potential in you, Will. It’s been so rewarding to watch your transformation.”

Will shook his head. “You changed me.”

“Life changed you," Hannibal countered. "I’m merely one of the people who influenced your course of action.”

“You’re not a person, Doctor,” Will muttered. “You’re far from that.”

Hannibal peered at him. “Then what am I, Will? A monster, like the one you see yourself becoming?"

“Your appetite for murder is voracious,” Will said. “To the average person, your actions would be construed as psychopathic.”

Hannibal shrugged. “Freedom from societal conventions of right and wrong does not make me a psychopath.”

Will grimaced. “But killing people and eating them does.”

“And what does that say about you, Will? Look at the company you keep.”

Will shifted a bit in his chair. “I know how much we’re alike.”

Hannibal licked his lips. “Do you think that by killing me, you’d be killing the worst part of yourself?”

Will mulled over his next words, before deciding that honesty would bring him no harm in this situation. “I’d have justice.”

Hannibal tilted his head to the side. “But think of the aftermath. Once I was dead, you would be alone again. No one else understands you like I do.”

“That’s probably the main reason why I haven’t tried to kill you again,” Will muttered. The alcohol was fast-acting tonight.

“But the fantasy of murdering me is ever present in your mind,” Hannibal pressed.

Will drained the contents of his glass, wincing as he gulped the fiery Lagavulin. “Can you blame me?”

“It is not my role to assign blame,” Hannibal said.

“Not even when I’m openly admitting to having these…urges?”

Hannibal tilted his head to the side. “Tell me more about when you killed Randall Tier.”

Will took a tight sip of air. “I imagined I was killing you.”

“In this lucid fantasy, how did you murder me?”

Will smirked. “With my hands.”

Hannibal peered at him. “Were you on top of me when you delivered the final blow?”

Will nodded; then drained the contents of his glass. He started to feel warmer, whether from the alcohol firing his blood, or openly fantasizing about Hannibal’s death, he couldn’t distinguish.

“Did I say anything to you?”

“You smiled,” Will finally replied. “Like you were glad.”

The fire crackled. Hannibal leaned back in his chair, pensive.

“Perhaps I was. In one’s fantasies, all is possible.”

“What dreams may come, to those who wake,” Will said with a bitter smile.

“Were anyone ever to kill me,” Hannibal leaned forward, gazing into Will's eyes, “I would want it to be you.”

“I’m flattered,” Will said in a voice barely above a whisper. His breath was tight in his throat.

Out of the corner of his mind's eye, Will saw the stag toss its head. It walked toward him, challenging; beckoning. He shivered.

"’Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him,” Hannibal quoted. “We are as one, and the same.”

“You’re already inside me," Will confessed.

Hannibal briefly glanced at Will’s mouth. “Where?”

Will tapped his head. “Here.”

The silence between them imparted veiled meanings.

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Dominion

Chapter Summary

> Will undergoes a risky initiation in order to gain access to Hannibal's secretive dominion.

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Will blinked, expecting to awaken from the dream, but Margot Verger still stood in front of him, shoulders bared; asking him to touch her. After a moment's hesitation, he traced Margot's hideous scars, and then found her ripe mouth. She tugged on his belt with a desperate sigh.

"Make me forget," she whispered against his lips.

It had been too long since his kiss with Alana. The physical proximity of another woman—a beautiful one at that—reminded Will what he had been craving all these long months of imprisonment, solitude, and self-imposed exile from Alana's graces.

Sighing, he hungrily devoured Margot's mouth. She sought him out with her fingers, applying a gentle, firm pressure to his most sensitive areas. Overwhelmed by the intimate contact, his knees buckled. A sudden flash of Randall Tier's glassy-eyed, dismantled corpse interrupted the pleasure of the moment.

"See yourself in me," Randall's apparition softly told him. Involuntarily, Will shuddered.

Margot touched his face. "You OK?"

Chasing away the gruesome vision, Will placed his hand over hers. "It's just...you're very convincing. I almost forgot that men aren't your usual preference."

Margot's eyes narrowed. "A girl's gotta step outside her comfort zone every once in a while."

Will frowned. "So you're trying me on for size?"

Margot looked at him with a serious expression. "Listen, Will. You're handsome, discreet, and, as far as I know, you're not abusive."

Will opened his mouth to speak, but Margot shushed him with two perfectly manicured fingertips.

"Right now," she whispered seductively, looking through lowered lashes, "I think what we both need is a little distraction."

The expression in Margot's eyes was a mixture between seductive and desperate. It dawned on Will that perhaps she had an ulterior motive, but he didn't pay much attention to that sudden insight. She was here now, in front of him; ready for the taking. Briefly, he wondered whether or not he would later regret their tryst, but it was too hard to think straight when she pressed her lithe body directly against his, creating unbearable friction.

Margot glanced down, taking note of his excitement. "Why don't you show me what else you have to offer?"

Will barely nodded. Taking her hand, he led her into the bedroom and firmly closed the door.

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The scenery shifted. Margot was nowhere in sight. Instead of lying in bed beneath rumpled sheets, Will found himself situated in the familiar wooded landscape of his nightmares. The trees around him grew impossibly taller, stretching out their sinewy limbs to welcome him into the night. Nocturnal creatures murmured, their voices providing an ominous soundtrack to underscore the severe disorientation Will felt.

He blinked, belatedly realizing he was naked and sitting on the forest floor next to a woman with raven hair. The detritus of dead leaves and sharp pine needles ground harshly into his unclothed flesh, but Will barely noticed when he recognized Alana's lovely face. Her petite, curvaceous body glowed pale blue in the moonlight. She was resplendently nude; thighs parted, mouth slightly open, she was even more beautiful without clothing.

Touch her, a deep voice commanded inside his head.

When he looked up, Will spied the hybrid Hannibal-stag sitting on the other side of Alana. The groteque creature sat on its haunches. A knowing leer crossed its coal-black lips. *We can both partake of her. Consider it a gesture of friendship.*

This scenario was a far cry from how Will had envisioned his long-desired moment of intimacy with the woman he still loved—across from the creature that frequented his disturbed fantasies. He tried to open his mouth to protest, but he could not move his lips to speak the words. An invisible force held his tongue.

Possessively, the hybrid caressed the curve of Alana's waist. *Show Will how charming you can be*, it suggested. *Let him feel what he's been missing.* It didn't speak aloud, but Will heard its raspy voice as clearly as if the words were uttered directly into his ear.

Obediently, Alana sat up. Despite his mounting horror, Will couldn't take his eyes off her. She was the picture of feminine perfection from head to toe. Everything he had always imagined her to be, and more. Night after night in a lonely jail cell, he had relied on his brightest memories of her to release the tension in his long-neglected body. He felt the ache of arousal as he stared at Alana's lithe physique.

Mount him, the hybrid commanded.

Before Will could react, Alana was straddling him; gripping his hips with her thighs. Her lovely blue eyes, usually so full of life, were vacant. Will tried to move away, but Alana would not release him. She looked to the hybrid, seeking direction. It grunted in approval. *Ride him*.

Coerced into motionlessness by the temptation of intimacy, Will could not speak - he only implored Alana to stop with his eyes. His message went unheeded as she took him in hand, guiding his need toward the source of her heat.

Look at me, the hybrid commanded. His eyes burned into Will's. *Remember this moment*.

Will found he could not disobey when Alana swiveled her hips and effortlessly drew him inside her.

"Alana," he groaned. "This isn't right."

Alana shifted forward, driving him in deeper. Her warmth around him was too tempting to ignore. Will's still-lucid mind went to war with his carnal urges as she increased the pace of her ministrations. Shaking, he cried out in pleasure. His muscles quivered in anticipation of release.

The hybrid donned a knowing smirk. *Doesn't she feel delightful*?

Will's hatred for the creature only fueled within him perverse desires. Unable to hold back any longer, he rocked his hips forward, pushing himself deeper inside Alana's body. He dug his heels into the black dirt beneath him. He arched his back, groaning in unrestrained enjoyment; savoring each rapturous sensation.

Wantonly, Alana moaned. She threw her head back, revealing the lines of her slender neck. Will cupped her breasts and buried his face between them, kissing their supple curves. Alana bared her teeth. Despite the feral look in her eyes, Will's desire for her increased. As they rocked together, steadily reaching the peak of frenzy, Will glanced at the hybrid. Eyes gleaming with approval, it greedily observed his frenetic motions.

Good boy, it sighed. *Your compliance is a most stimulating sight to behold*.

Will watched the hybrid slip an elongated, claw-tipped hand between its legs and start to pleasure itself. Ungodly sounds of lust provided the soundtrack for his love-making with Alana. All around them, the forest air vibrated with a sinister melody of need and desire.

Come inside me.

Will knew the words were meant for him, and him alone.

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Sweating, Will awoke, aching with aborted ecstasy. He swept damp curls off his feverish forehead and tried to calm his breathing. Still, he heard the echo of the hybrid's raspy voice inside his head.

Let me guide you toward release.

Unable to vanquish the persistent tension from his body, Will stared at the walls for a full ten minutes before finishing what his incubus had begun.

***

"Will," Jack said with a serious face. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

They sat alone in Jack's office. Will had come to dread these conversations. Lately, he found himself forced to tell only half-truths. Had Jack known the extent of his descent into the abyss, he most likely would have pulled the plug on their grand scheme to catch Hannibal red-handed.

Will crossed his arms. "I told you, Jack—I'm in all in. Not matter what the stakes."

Jack slowly nodded his head. "Yes, you did tell me that. But I can't stop worrying about what how this situation will affect your mental state. It wasn't that long ago that I nearly lost you to the darkness. Now you're submerged in it."

"Being fair, you contributed to that." Will couldn't keep bitterness from seeping into his tone. On some level, not too deep down in his consciousness, he still resented Jack for believing that he was the Chesapeake Ripper.

"I should have listened to you in the first place," Jack agreed. "But there's nothing I can do to change the past." Pausing for a moment, he readjusted his tie. "Are you absolutely certain you've got the situation under control?"

Will smiled ruefully. "I'm not sure about anything anymore. But Hannibal's falling fast under my influence."

Pensive, Jack said, "Is he the only one being influenced? I can't get what you did to Randall Tier's corpse out of my head."

Will took a deep breath. Truthfully, he couldn't get it out of his head either—but not for the reasons that Jack assumed.

"In order to keep Hannibal's trust, I have to play the part," he said.

Jack looked uncertain. "I hope you're right. This situation is precarious. You're putting yourself at risk. Again."

Will shrugged. "Risks are worth taking, if they serve the purpose of justice."

Jack rapped his knuckles on the desk. "Tread carefully, Will. Hannibal Lecter has deceived you before."

"My eyes were closed then," Will argued. "I couldn't see him."

"And now?"

Looking for the right words, Will fiddled with a stray thread on his coat before replying.

“When I look into Hannibal’s mind, I see myself,” he said, staring off into space. His eyes misted over with an indescribable emotion. “I see a man similar to the one I could have become, had Fate guided me down a different path. Reaching inside Hannibal’s mind helps me understand how to influence our interactions in my favor. I’m holding Doctor Lecter firmly within my grasp.”

“Be careful with your confidence, Will,” Jack warned him. “Larry Kersten put it best when he said, ‘Before you attempt to beat the odds, be sure you could survive the odds beating you.’”

Will chuckled without humor. “Whether or not any of us survives remains to be seen.”

Jack abstained from joining in Will’s dark laughter. “You sound like a man about to sign to his own death warrant.”

Will chose to ignore the blatant concern on his face. “I’m sorry, Jack, but I have to cut this short. Tonight, I’m having dinner with Hannibal, and I need to make sure I choose the right cut of meat.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “Providing the meat again? Smart idea.”

Will refrained from saying that he entertained all kinds of ideas, but he hoped that this particular one would serve as the correct password to successfully enter the next level of Hannibal’s secretive dominion.

***

Seated at Hannibal’s grand dining room table, Will regarded the culinary work of art on his plate. Assorted colors, textures, and shapes adorned the beautifully presented repast, highlighting the star of the dish: Freddie Lounds. At least, a protein that Hannibal assumed was Freddie Lounds. Really, the credit belonged to Randall Tier. The look on Hannibal’s face when Will presented him with this surprise gift did not disappoint. Flashes of excitement, hope, and disbelief had registered across his usually placid features in a matter of seconds; then quickly disappeared, as if they had never existed.

Across the table, Will felt Hannibal’s expectant gaze on him. Stabbing a piece of the braised meat with his fork, Will lifted it to his mouth. The realization that he had been eating human flesh, unaware for months, had occurred long ago. He had already absorbed the shock from that blow.

In truth, he heard Hannibal saying inside his mind. *The taste of human flesh is now something you crave*.

Without hesitating, he forked a piece of Randall’s delicately-simmered thigh into his mouth. The meat rested on his tongue for a brief moment before he started chewing. The flavor had a familiarity, but it was none too palatable. It suffered from certain lack of finesse, not from the preparation, but perhaps from the way in which the meat was obtained.

A look of near-reverence came into Hannibal's eyes as he watched Will eat. Will had to keep himself from grinning in triumph at how well he had Hannibal fooled. It was clear that he really thought they were eating Freddie Lounds. He had fallen for Will's ruse hook, line, and sinker.

As he chewed his kill, Will's cruel smile spoke volumes of poetry.

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After dinner, Hannibal accompanied Will on the drive back to Hannibal's office so he could pick up the gloves he had mistakenly left during his last session.

"Perhaps you'd care for a digestif?" Hannibal offered.

Feeling curiously at ease, Will accepted. He stood by the fire while Hannibal prepared the drinks. A hot-hued kaleidoscope of colors exploded from the crackling embers.

Hannibal approached him, brandy snifter in hand. "A bit of Armagnac aids digestion. Our meal was hot and heavy tonight."

Will smirked. "She was indeed a filling feast."

Hannibal looked at Will through hooded eyes. "Do you feel satisfied?"

Will faintly smiled. "I feel like I've only begun to learn how to taste."

"There's a melody I'd like to hear, if you would indulge me," Hannibal said, handing him a dram of Armagnac.

Will indicated his approval with a slight nod of his head. Pleased, Hannibal mounted the ladder and climbed to the second story of his office. A few moments later, the sounds of Monti's "Czardas" drifted down from the balcony. The alternately robust and indulgent piano accompaniment provided the perfect structure to cage the violin's bipolarity. Melded by a mutually parasitic partnership, the two instruments expressed love and loathing in equal measure.

Will closed his eyes and let the sounds wash over him. Not a big fan of classical music before he met Hannibal, he had grown somewhat accustomed to it after spending months in the doctor's company. Lately, he found the compositions soothing.

Hannibal descended the staircase and approached; circling around him like a shark.

"Do you know anything about freemasonry, Will?"

Will blinked. "It's a cult."

"An ancient brotherhood," Hannibal amended. "Protected by sworn secrecy for centuries. When a new member is welcomed into the fold, there is a certain ritual he must undergo."

Will's mouth went dry. He hadn't expected the conversation to veer in this direction. "Are you a Freemason?"

Hannibal's obsidian eyes glittered.

"Many men from all different walks of life subscribe to the brotherhood," he mused. "Doctors, teachers, garbage collectors…I am not a member, but I'll admit to harboring a deep curiosity about their customs and beliefs."

Hannibal paused. Pursing his lips, he thought for a moment longer. Then, he said, "With your permission, I'd like to us to enact an abbreviated version of the Masonic initiation ritual."

Will's furrowed his brows. "Isn't that a form of blasphemy? I was under the impression that non-members were not supposed to perform sacred rituals."

"I don't subscribe the idea of blasphemy," Hannibal sneered. "One has to be God-fearing in order for such a prospect to carry any weight. I intend to interpret the Masonic initiation ritual in my own manner. The main purpose is to bring you closer to your true self."

"I suppose I have had an epiphany about who I really am," Will mused. He took a small sip of Armagnac; then rested the glass on the mantle of the fireplace.

He didn't know who was responsible, but suddenly he and Hannibal were very close together. Hannibal stood still, as if waiting for Will to make a move. Frozen, Will watched as Hannibal removed his dinner jacket and folded it across his chair. Deftly, he unbuttoned the top button of his crisp white shirt and deftly undid his forest green cravat.

Will frowned, confused. "What are you doing?"

"'We are born knowing nothing and with much striving we learn but a little; yet all the while we are bound by laws that hearken to no plea of ignorance, and measure out their rewards and punishments with calm indifference.'"

"Paul Elmer Moore was wise."

Hannibal smiled, pleased that Will had recognized the quote.

"'When, therefore, his suffering was over, and his humiliation past," Hannibal recited, "the clothing in which he was invested was regarded as a meritorious clothing, available not only for himself, but for all who were initiated into the mysteries.'"

"Your memorization skills are impressive," Will quipped. His stomach felt queasy.

Hannibal tossed off Will's compliment with a casual wave of the hand. "Within my vast collection of memories, the catalog of quotes represents the least of my accomplishments."

Will started to doubt his ruse. It was possible Hannibal knew their dinner wasn't from Freddie Lounds. After all, Hannibal was the master of deception.

“It would behoove us to mark the progression of your becoming with a symbolic gesture,” Hannibal declared. From his pants pocket, he produced a small, emerald-encrusted dagger. Engraved upon its silver hilt was the familiar symbol of Freemasons—the mysterious “G”. Slowly, Hannibal withdrew the dagger from its sheath. The blade flashed.

Will felt a trickle of fear.

“What is the role of the apprentice in the initiation?” he asked, trying not to stutter.

Hannibal gazed at the dagger, admiring it. “The apprentice must first partially disrobe. Traditionally, he unbuttons his shirt, exposing his left breast. He rolls up his right pant leg and wears a slipper on the left foot.”

He fingered the length of the dagger. “A rope is wrapped twice around his neck, and then he is blindfolded. ”

Will’s eyes were glued to the dagger. “An act of humiliation.”

“An act of spiritual surrender," Hannibal corrected. "You've crossed a pivotal threshold, Will. Never again can you retrace your footsteps to undo past actions. This is a crucial turning point in the refinement of your self-awareness.”

Will started to sweat. “I’m living a new existence.”

“What repulsed you before now calls to you. Will you hearken?” Hannibal asked, slightly brandishing the dagger.

“‘I will see what he will do, before I will hearken to any man's judgment,’” Will quoted. His voice trembled a little.

Hannibal smiled. “Clever boy.”

“I aim to please,” Will said. The sweat beading on his forehead was cold.

“Let’s return to the matter at hand. I want you to trust me, Will,” Hannibal said. He lowered the dagger. “Are you able to?”

Will’s eyelids fluttered. “What kind of a question is that?”

“I don’t want to jeopardize the relationship we’ve recently re-forged.”

“More than you’ve already done so?” Will couldn’t resist saying, despite his inner mounting terror.

Hannibal didn’t answer. Instead, he approached, removing his tie with the hand not holding the dagger as he entered Will’s personal space.

“Will you permit me to blindfold you?” Hannibal asked, looking down at him. Will could feel the heat radiating off his body.

“If that’s an integral part of the ritual, then I suppose I should comply,” he found himself saying.

Hannibal held the tie in front of his face. The dagger remained at his side. “Being deprived of sight will heighten your other senses.”

“I’ll have to rely on faith to get me through,” Will replied. A side of him couldn’t believe that he was about to allow a dagger-wielding Hannibal Lecter to blindfold him, but the stronger side convinced him it was for the best. He needed Hannibal to believe in him. It was the only way he would steal the upper hand in their relationship.

“Will you rely on faith in yourself? Or faith in me?” Hannibal asked him. Lightly, placed the tie over Will’s right shoulder.

“Faith in God,” Will answered, his voice steady.

Inwardly, he breathed a sigh of relief when Hannibal placed the dagger on the mantle. “Do you believe God will protect you, Will?”

He trailed his fingers toward the first button on Will’s dark purple shirt.

“If there is a God,” Will said, watching Hannibal’s fingers slip the first button of his shirt through the buttonhole, “he will do what he wants with me.”

“Are you not afraid that I’ll do what I want?” Hannibal asked him in a low voice. Nimbly, his fingers unbuttoned Will’s shirt the rest of the way.

“Do you want to hurt me?” Will whispered. His heart was a pounding drumbeat, pushing against his rib cage.

“It is not my desire to cause you pain,” Hannibal said, frowning.

Will glanced at the mantle. The dagger flashed from electric blue to pale orange in the blazing firelight.

Taking a deep breath, Will said, “I’ve come this far. What’s a little further?”

A lukewarm puff of air caressed his bare chest when Hannibal opened his shirt and pushed the left sleeve over his shoulder, exposing him. Goosebumps rippled over his flesh like tiny waves. All he could hear was the fire crackling, and the sound of his own ragged breathing.

“I think we’ll forgo the rolling of the pant leg, and the slipper,” Hannibal said. Standing back, he admired Will’s partially clothed form. “And alas, I have no rope. So we’ll just have to make do.”

Will gave a curt nod.

Hannibal lifted the corners of his sensual mouth. “You have been necessarily stripped. But I don’t want to humiliate you, Will. I want to welcome you into the fold.”

Will dropped his eyes to the floor. “I believe you.”

“With that being said…” Hannibal licked his lips. “Shall we get on with it?”

“Go ahead,” Will said.

Looking pleased, Hannibal removed the tie from Will’s shoulder and tied it around his eyes. It wasn’t completely dark behind the blindfold, but it was dark enough for Will to imagine he was without sight. He felt Hannibal step away from him, and then walk to the other side of the room.

“So what do you I do next?” Will asked to the corner he assumed Hannibal to be occupying.

“The burden of the ritual lies upon me. All you have to do is stand still and wait.”

The power of the maestro was in his calm, soothing voice - Will felt hypnotized. Hannibal’s words alternately relaxed him and set him on edge. There was something wildly freeing about being in such a defenseless position. Will thought perhaps he had masochistic tendencies, being able to glean enjoyment from this brand of torture. He didn’t hear Hannibal’s footsteps returning, but he smelled him. The slight mixture of heady-sweet Armagnac and the rich scent of Hannibal’s French-soap-scented skin filled his nose. Hearing a small clink, he realized the sound was Hannibal removing the dagger from the mantle. Inadvertently, Will started breathing faster.

A warm, firm hand stroked his naked shoulder. “Do you swear to guard my secrets with your life?”

The cool tip of the dagger pressed into his bare chest. Deeply inhaling, Will closed his eyes behind the blindfold and succumbed to the scintillating knowledge that Hannibal’s eyes were skewering him to the core.

“I swear.”

Remnants of the Will Graham he once knew drifted towards an uncertain trajectory as Hannibal gently trailed the dagger down a little further to the center. He pushed the tip of the shining blade into the skin above Will’s heart. It was almost enough to pierce his flesh, but not quite. Hannibal knew exactly what he was doing.

“I’m stricken by your beauty,” he murmured close to Will’s ear. His hot breath sent shivers down Will’s spine. “It is as if I am viewing you with the eyes of a proud father.”

Will’s tone of voice did not betray his fear. “Is that how you see me? As your child?”

“I employ a multitude of lenses to observe you,” Hannibal said, removing his hand from Will’s shoulder.

Will forced his body not to tense. "What's your preferred method of viewing?"

He still felt vulnerable, but the potential danger of the situation seemed to have past - for the moment, at least.

“Some of my views are unfiltered, others muted,” Hannibal continued. “Although subject to a certain degree of variability, the picture as a whole remains essentially the same.”

Will felt him trace the edges of the blindfold with the dagger. His heart threatened to burst forth from his chest with the effort of the extra beats. Again, he began to doubt his safety.

“Your pulse is fairly pounding,” Hannibal observed, gently skimming the side of Will’s neck with the dagger. “Does your lack of control over this situation excite you?”

Will didn’t know how to answer that. All the nerves in his body were buzzing from the overwhelming surge of conflicting emotions.

“Open your eyes, and perceive the world anew,” Hannibal whispered.

Will felt the dagger move away from his neck, up to his face. Before his brain had time to register it, Hannibal had sliced the tie in two. The severed cloth fell away from his eyes. Will couldn’t stop his gasp of relief. As the tie to the floor, he winced and rubbed his eyes. For a moment, the dim room seemed too bright.

When he was able to focus again, he saw Hannibal staring at him with a look of reverence. “Your acceptance of your true nature is deeply moving to behold.”

He let out a shaky laugh. “Perhaps evil becomes me.”

“Not evil, Will,” Hannibal corrected. “You might think that I am evil because I am destructive, but beauty is often born from the wrath of annihilation.”

Will peered at him. “You consider yourself wrathful?”

Hannibal’s gaze hardened. “Divine retribution spares none the forces of vengeance.”

“Avenging or revenging?”

“Perhaps a little of both,” Hannibal said. His features softened. “As long as you’re by my side, I have little use for wrath.”

Then, Will *really* saw it: the fond look of devotion was not an act put upon in order to deceive him into friendship. However twisted and scheming, Hannibal’s feelings for him represented a transmutation of deep infatuation. Inwardly, he squirmed. The satisfaction of watching his carefully executed long con falling neatly into place was intense - he could see the end game more clearly now. As long as Hannibal continued to idolize him, Will would keep encouraging the symbiosis between them, and play Hannibal for a fool. The doctor's increasingly intimate overtures of trust and affection were unwanted in theory, but desired in practice. *After all*, Will reminded himself, *I'm a damn good fisherman*.

Tiptoeing around the underground bombs in the midst of the battlefield would not serve as the best action. Instead, Will would keep creeping through the trenches, weaseling his way over to the enemy’s side. However far inside Hannibal’s madness Will allowed himself to go, he could not lose sight of his ultimate goal. After all, Hannibal Lecter was the most brilliant killer Will had ever encountered. Tapping into Hannibal’s inherent loneliness with his gift of

empathy, he would topple the empire Hannibal had spent countless years fortifying with diabolical precision.

“To the future,” Hannibal said, handing Will his glass of Armagnac. He brandished his own. “A new world awaits.”

They clinked glasses. As the fire’s embers turned to ashes, Will hid his smirk of self-congratulation behind a preemptive sip of the profoundly enjoyable Armagnac.

Beasts

Chapter Summary

The Vergers take actions that complicate Hannibal's plans for Will.

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Mason Verger was a weasel of a man. His stooped gait and frivolous hand gestures, coupled with an air of haughty insouciance, added to his lack of appeal. Worst of all, he had terrible manners—or rather, an entire lack of courtesy. Hannibal inwardly frowned when Mason casually scraped beneath his fingernails to remove a bit of dirt. He watched in mute horror as Mason pointedly flicked bits of filth onto the seafoam-green office floor.

Hannibal's great displeasure reflected in his face. "Not having an heir might put you at a severe disadvantage," he said, reminding Mason of the subject at hand: Margot's pregnancy.

Mason peered at him. "How is that? I'm the only heir who counts right now."

"Indeed you are," Hannibal agreed. His eyes narrowed. "But what about the future, Mason? How does Margot factor into the vision you envision for yourself?"

It took Mason a moment to realize the implication behind Hannibal's question. He scowled. "Margot doesn't get her jollies from men very often, Doctor. At least, not as far as I know."

"In matters of biology, that fact matters little," Hannibal replied, his gaze steady. "As you're well aware, Margot needn't prefer man in order to successfully conceive."

Mason peered at him in that hideous owlish way of his. "My dear sister wouldn't know what to do with a child," he sniffed. "She'd probably end up killing it by neglecting to feed the brat."

Hannibal's nostrils flared in contempt. "Are you going to leave yourself in a position of vulnerability, Mason?"

The heir to the Verger fortune smirked. "Doctor, are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?"

Hannibal shrugged. "It's all in a matter of interpretation."

"Papa always said the power of words was in their propositional abilities."

"Right your papa was," Hannibal mused.

“You know, Doctor,” Mason laughed in his flamboyant way. “I think you see suggestion and coercion as two disparate concepts.”

“How observant you think yourself, Mason,” Hannibal couldn’t stop himself from saying. Pursing his lips, he surveyed Mason’s agitated, hyperactive state. “You seem to be under the influence. Which drug is it?”

Mason tittered. “Fear, Doctor. Margot has found a way to continue the Verger name without me. That revelation is enough to spin my head around on its axis.”

“What are you going to do about it, then?” Hannibal asked. “Will you sit idly by and watch as your birthright is taken from you?”

“Margot’s brat may not survive,” Mason said. His eyes gleamed behind his glasses. "Accidents happen all the time."

“‘From his high crest, headlong he plummets to the dust of hope,’” Hannibal quoted.

Mason’s chin jutted forward. “Did you make that up?”

Hannibal smirked. “Perhaps in another lifetime, long ago.”

***

A few hours later, he delicately sniffed the perfumed remnants of the silken hair-strands Alana had left behind on his clothes. Her company was usually enjoyable for short periods of time, but he didn’t care for her growing doubt towards him. The questions she asked were becoming increasingly analytical. Earlier, when they were kissing, he had smelled the gunpowder on her hands. It troubled him, but not enough to reveal to her the side of him he kept hidden. Being trained in suspicion, her attitude didn’t surprise him. Perhaps she finally saw past his person-suit, and glimpsed his monstrosity - the face only his victims saw, in their final, desperate moments of agony.

He had wondered now for some time whether or not Alana Bloom still served any useful purpose in his life. Her beauty and relative charms were not reason enough for Hannibal to keep from paying her a visit. She had served her purpose as a pawn in his strategy to separate her from Will. This new development, however, illustrated that she was a potential threat. Hannibal sighed. The psychiatrist buried within Alana’s fool-in-love persona was finally starting to catch the subtle signs that he and Will were more than friends.

Amused, Hannibal chuckled to himself. He walked over to the desk and opened the top drawer, staring at the bullets he had pilfered only a few minutes ago; before Alana had slipped away, complaining of a migraine. He wished she would have been more original in making her excuse. It was an insult to his intelligence for her to be so obvious about her avoidance. Hannibal had always hoped Alana would not become involved in the inevitable fallout of The Ripper, but he would show no hesitation in making her a casualty of war if need be. He supposed he preferred the option of not killing her to the option of murder, but extreme measures were sometimes needed in order to achieve the desired result.

Hannibal decided to warn Will immediately—just in case Alana had voiced her concerns to him; or worse, to Jack. The dinner he had planned for the two of tonight would present the proper time for his broaching the sore subject of Alana's loyalty. Though he knew Will was on his side now, Hannibal swore not to delude himself about the depth of Will's feelings for his erstwhile love interest. The wounds of rejection were, after all, still fresh.

***

As moonlight filtered through the French doors of Hannibal's imposing dining room, it bathed Will's features with a gentle luminosity. Hannibal gazed at him, controlling his impulse to smooth the disheveled curls from his muse's forehead. Side by side, they stood by the French doors, watching the stars. Hannibal had planned a late meal for them tonight: *mezethes*, a collection of small, savory plates; accompanied by Ouzo Giannatsi. The fiery Greek apéritif would whet their appetites, and fuel their ruminations about men and gods; good, evil, and the grey in between.

Hannibal handed Will his first shot of Ouzo, and then poured his own. Their sharing of dinner and drinks had evolved from a habit to a ritual since the night of Will's initiation into his hidden lair of secrets. Breaking bread together on a regular basis only strengthened their irrefutable bond.

Will regarded the clear, silky fluid in his shot glass. "Bottoms up?"

Hannibal shook his head. "Consume with caution. Ouzo is a fiery Greek aperitif known for its deceptive qualities."

He eyed his drink. "Just when you think it hasn't affected you, the drink will reveal its unseen power to incapacitate. It's sometimes served with a small amount of cold, distilled water. Tonight, we're drinking it deeply chilled, as is customary in Greece. The experience will be more authentic as such."

A few crystals floated on the surface of the Ouzo. Will admired the drink for a moment longer before taking an experimental sip. Hannibal was pleased to observe from Will's expression that he might have a taste for it.

Licking his lips, Will said, "Licorice."

"Anise," Hannibal amended.

Will nodded, and took another thoughtful sip. "It's potent, but not overpowering."

Hannibal tasted his own drink. The anise flavor refreshed his palate. "Giannatsi is purportedly the finest Ouzo in the world."

Will nodded. "That's easy to believe."

Abruptly changing the subject, Hannibal said, "Alana is starting to suspect."

"Alana has proved herself to be an unreliable source," Will mildly replied. "She doesn't have any proof of our involvement in Freddie Lounds' murder."

“Of course not. Nevertheless, she may voice her suspicions to Jack.”

Will shook his head in disagreement. “I don’t think Jack gives much credit to Dr. Bloom’s theories, especially since she was convinced I was the Chesapeake Ripper.”

Hannibal noted Will’s sarcastic delivery. “Do you give her any credit?”

“Perhaps you should be the one to judge her qualifications,” Will said. He took a bigger sip of his drink. “You know her on a level far more intimate than I do.”

Quickly, he drained the contents of his glass.

Hannibal frowned. “You do realize I’m not in love with her.”

Will’s laugh sounded painful. “It’s a cold comfort to know that you’re reveling in the spoils of your conquest without forming an emotional attachment.”

“You’ve changed, Will,” Hannibal mused. “I always sensed this day was coming, but I confess I did not discern its imminence.”

“Now, that isn’t true,” Will said. He smiled without humor. “You have been waiting for my metamorphosis to quicken for ages now.”

Hannibal looked at him in surprise. “Only because I knew it would ultimately benefit you."

Will’s gaze darkened. “Sometimes I don’t know who I am without the devil inside. I want him gone, but he’s part of me.”

“Then you should welcome him,” Hannibal suggested. Leisurely, he took another swallow of Ouzo. "Don’t be fearful of the side of you that seeks to hide.”

“Sometimes, it seems the very air I breathe is tinged with blackness.” Briefly, Will closed his eyes. “It’s suffocating.”

Hannibal’s eyes shone with dark purpose. “Humanity goes most recklessly astray at night.”

“Humanity can go astray in broad daylight.” Will countered.

Hannibal scrutinized the full moon. “Superstition indicates that violent crimes occur more frequently after the sun sets.”

Will folded his arms across his chest. “I didn’t think you had much room in your mind for superstition.”

Hannibal kept his smile unreadable. “Instead of withering at night, you flourish. Take your creative display of Randall’s corpse as an example.”

Will nodded his head in Hannibal’s direction. “Under your careful instruction, perhaps. You’re watching me all the time; leading me in the direction you that best suits your proclivities.”

Hannibal intently regarded him. “Are my proclivities so dissimilar to yours?”

Distractedly, Will rubbed the sides of his nose, feeling the slight grooves the nosepiece of his glasses left behind. "Perhaps not.”

“I’m assisting you in realizing your potential.” Hannibal reminded him.

“You want me to embrace the monster I’m becoming.”

“Not the monster, Will,” he amended. “The man.” Deliberately, Hannibal made eye contact. “My partner.”

He found it deeply satisfactory to behold the newfound realization dawning in his apprentice's face.

“This is far beyond friendship." Will's tone of voice was cautious, but not alarmed.

Hannibal let his gaze linger on him a moment longer. “I shouldn’t need to remind you that our bond reaches past the boundaries of patient and therapist.”

He paused, and took a step in Will’s direction. “If I told you I cared for you deeply, would it make me weak in your estimation?”

Will tightened his jaw. “Emotion itself can be a crippling weakness.”

“It can also indicate strength of character.”

Will took a step back. His body cast nebulous shadows on the wall. “Which is it for you?”

“I have watched countless patients succumb to the affliction of placing feelings above logic,” Hannibal quietly said. “Still, emotion is a powerful human experience. It’s what sets us apart from beasts.”

“Beasts have emotion.”

“When it serves a practical purpose, perhaps." He pointed a finger at Will. "Tell me, does the lion feel for his prey as he administers the kiss of death?”

“What purpose does our bond serve for you?”

“Our interactions remind me that my wish for inspiring companionship need not go answered.”

“For the being, perhaps. Who knows how long this will last?”

Will’s words made a distinct impression. Hannibal gently gripped his shoulder. “Do you think I could so easily let you go?”

“Nothing is easy with you. Except killing,” Will responded.

Hannibal tightened his hold. “Were I to make an attempt on your life, would you resist?”

Will looked into Hannibal's eyes. "I would fight until the end."

Hannibal furrowed his brows, but not in displeasure. Will always managed to stir him whenever he rose to the occasion of a good verbal sparring.

"Will, you are very dear to me. I never want to see you suffer."

"You watched me suffer for months and did nothing about it. You encouraged my disease," Will said quietly. Hannibal detected an undercurrent of anger in his tone.

"I knew you would pull through eventually." He let go of Will's shoulder. "You're stronger than you think."

"As strong as you are?"

Hannibal's half-smile spoke words that needed no voice to convey their meaning. Grasping Will's chin, he tilted his head to the side, admiring the beautiful structure of his face. "You are my equal, Will. I've never met anyone else quite like you. Truly, you have exceeded my wildest expectations."

Without thinking, he stroked Will's cheek. The stubbled skin was warm beneath his fingertips. Bending down, he silently inhaled near the nape of Will's neck. The irritating mixture of cheap ship-bottle cologne hovered heavy on the surface, but the piquancy of Will's Ouzo-scented sweat was intoxicating.

Will took a sharp, audible breath. "I can't trust myself around you," he said through gritted teeth. "But you're the only one I can trust."

Lingering a moment longer, Hannibal removed his hand from Will's face and placed it on his shoulder instead.

"I'm very fond of you," he said in a low voice. "Let's keep it that way."

For a moment longer, his hand rested pleasantly on Will's shoulder. He could feel Will's quickening pulse, and the heat of his lightly perspiring skin; the slight elevation of his pulse.

Will stared at him. "What else do you want from me?"

"Only what you want for yourself."

Shifting his gaze to the window, Will said, "What if I told you I had nothing left to give?"

Hannibal gave him a wry smile.

"I wouldn't want to believe you," he murmured close to Will's ear; briefly stroking his chestnut curls. "I look forward to witnessing the continuous evolution of your transformation."

When Hannibal took his hand away from Will's hair, he was delighted to find that the conflicted expression on Will's face implied that he might have regretted the loss.

“Hannibal,” Will began. He looked at the moon again. “I want—”

Suddenly, his cell phone rang. For a moment, he made no move to answer it.

Though he was curious to know what Will was going to say, Hannibal’s keen intuition told him that the phone call was more important.

“Better take that,” Hannibal suggested.

Will blinked. “Right.”

Reaching into his pants pocket, he pulled out his cell phone and looked at the caller ID. With a frown, he took the call.

“Margot? I was—what?” His voice grew in volume. “When? Are you—is the baby—?” Will fell silent. His shoulders sagged. His hands balled into fists. “I’ll be there soon.”

When Will looked at Hannibal again, his eyes were black with rage. "That son-of-a-bitch."

Hannibal raised his eyebrows. Mason hadn’t wasted any time ensuring that he had no competition to the Verger throne. His fast action was clever, yet despicable. Though Hannibal loathed him, he couldn’t help feeling a mixture of satisfaction and relief that Mason had done his bidding, and promptly severed Will’s ties to Margot.

***

Still shaking with rage, Will stalked away from Muskrat Farm. How close he had come to dropping Mason into the pit of bloodthirsty pigs so they could devour him…but no, that was not a viable option. Jack needed solid proof of Hannibal’s guilt in order to arrest him, and Mason Verger was the perfect prey. Hannibal detested the vile Verger - no doubt he harbored homicidal urges towards him. Mason was the epitome of Hannibal’s perception of rudeness. Once merely an annoyance, the spoiled daddy's boy had ultimately proved his expendability. As Will approached his car, he allowed himself a brief imagining about how Hannibal would make Mason meet his end.

Perhaps Dr. Lecter would roast Mason on a spit until he was all rosy and brown; a beautiful green apple stuffed into his mouth. Green was, after all, the color of avarice. Will buckled his seat belt. He leaned against the headrest, unaware of the vicious smile on his face. Mason Verger would serve as the perfect main course in the next impeccably prepared supper for two. Front and center on the stage of Hannibal's design, Mason would meet a violent end; paying the ultimate price for his dirty deeds. It was a comforting thought. Will smiled in scandalous enjoyment of the scene his mind’s eye created. His veins pounded with the thrill of the power that encompassed him.

But it’s Hannibal you want, the part of his brain that wasn’t infected by the doctor’s influence muttered. Mason may have mutilated Margot, and ripped away Will’s chance at becoming a father in the near future, but Will was certain that Hannibal had used his influence to tip the scales toward his preferred reality. Curiously, the rage he ought to feel towards his former trusted mentor was transmuting into murderous fantasies about ending Mason. Even though

Hannibal was equally – perhaps more - guilty than the brother Verger, Will couldn't find it within himself to hate him completely. At this point, his thoughts were too enmeshed within the elaborate personality he had constructed to keep Hannibal's suspicions at bay. He had meant to stay on track with Jack and the FBI, but the more he allowed himself to become like Hannibal, the further away from legal justice he had strayed. Now, he couldn't trust any of his motivations.

Will started the engine and sighed. He had grown weary of resisting his impulses.

"What have I become?" he murmured.

In the passenger seat, the hybrid's grotesque profile flashed into his thoughts. *Come stand beside me*, its phantom voice whispered. *Immerse yourself in the darkness*.

For the new Will Graham, it was a beckoning too powerful to ignore.

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Enticement

Chapter Summary

> Will can't get Hannibal out of his head, while Hannibal ponders revealing Will's surprise gift.

***

Alana's nude corpse, adorned with sacrificial white lotus flowers, rested upon a human-sized golden tray in the center of Hannibal's dining table. Palms upturned, hands slack at her sides, she gazed upward with unseeing eyes. Grey tendrils of smoke eased their way around her, caressing her body with insidious possessiveness. The serene statue of Buddha at her feet looked upon the tableau with silent approval.

Will sat across from the hybrid. Hannibal was to his left. Beverly Katz's intricately dissected corpse, still encased in glass, was distributed piece-by-piece: occupying three chairs on one side of the table, three on the other. Her half-face stared at Will accusingly.

This is all your fault, he imagined her reproaching him. *You got me killed and then put on display like some twisted science fair project*.

"To be fair, Will was in prison when I ended your life, Beverly," Hannibal suddenly said. "Although..." he paused, swirling his wine. The fluid shone red-violet under the brilliantly shimmering chandelier. Hannibal inhaled, capturing the wine's inviting aroma. "He certainly gave you the unfortunate inspiration to pay me a visit."

Will wanted to close his eyes: un-see the terrible death tableau before him, but he was not in control of his body movements. He was merely the puppet; unable to control his own movements; under the spell of a lurid nightmare; the unwilling star in a cast of characters conjured by his own dark mind. In order to avoid looking at Beverly's dissected, reanimated corpse, he focused his attention on Alana's blanched beauty instead.

The hybrid ran its pointed claws along the outline of her figure. *A necessary sacrifice*, it spoke inside his mind.

"Was death the only way to keep her safe?" he murmured. Tenderly, he stroked her smooth, stony cheek. Rigor mortis well-established, she was lovely still.

She chose death, the hybrid replied. *The responsibility of her fate is not yours to assume*.

"I assume responsibility for all of them." He wasn't sure if the voice he heard was his own, or Hannibal's.

Pick up the fork, the hybrid commanded.

The rest of the room faded away when Will felt a familiar hand on his shoulder.

"Unless," suggested Hannibal, "You'd rather forgo utensils entirely."

He stroked Will's upper arm through his suit jacket. "I know how much you like to use your hands."

"She's too beautiful to eat," Will protested.

"Then it would be a sin to waste her," Hannibal said with a sly smile.

Desperately, Will begged, "Don't make me do this."

Hannibal's smile never left his lips. "It's already done."

Using one of its impossibly long finger-claws, the hybrid cut a thin slice from Alana's inner thigh. The wound bled for only a moment before the blood coagulated.

"An appropriate fat-to-muscle ratio adds more flavor," Hannibal remarked. He peered at the portion of meat, analyzing it. "It makes the protein more satisfying to consume."

The hybrid smiled without his eyes, and dipped the piece of raw flesh into the creamy sauce beside Will's plate. Mockingly, it brandished the piece at him, offering a taste.

Her flesh will sate you.

"Bon appétit," Hannibal said.

Will's mind protested, but his body complied with his tormentor's request; and he took a bite of Alana's savory inner thigh.

"Well?" Hannibal prompted him. His eyes had an eager shine. "Does the menu meet with your approval?"

Will felt a sick grin break over his face as he chewed. Alana tasted more delicious...

"...than I ever dared imagine," he heard himself saying in a voice that sounded like Hannibal's. A perverse little chuckle eeked out of his still-chewing mouth.

"Carpaccio is an especial delicacy. Just wait until you see what you've provided for the main course," Hannibal beamed. He tipped the main part of Beverly's corpse a subtly dashing wink, and she had the grace enough to look reluctantly impressed.

"I provided?" Will queried, reaching for a sip of Hannibal's wine. The raw saltiness of Alana's meat overwhelmed his palate. Openly delighted by Will's gesture of intimacy, Hannibal took the white linen napkin off his lap. A few droplets of wine bloomed like roses and bled onto the pristine fabric where it brushed the edges of Will's lips.

"There."

Hannibal patted Will's mouth a few more times with the napkin, even though he had wiped it clean.

Will caught his wrist mid-motion. "You have a habit of trying to mold me into the person you want me to be."

"The way I want you to be?"

Hannibal allowed Will to lower his wrist to the table. "Or the way you were always meant to be?"

The hybrid gestured to the empty seat on Will's right. A man's slumped form suddenly appeared. Without needing to see the face belonging to the body, Will knew it was Jack.

Hungrily, the hybrid ran its wet, pointed tongue across its coal lips.

Let's see if he tastes more robust than she does.

Will's mind left the moment the hybrid forced its claws inside the cavity of Jack's chest, crushing the flesh as if it were paper. Withdrawing a chunk of severed aorta, clutching it between its claws, the hybrid sucked the ragged end of it like a straw; slurping juicy mouthfuls of Jack's lifeblood down its eager gullet.

"Will," Jack murmured, still alive. "Don't try to save me."

"God," Will gasped.

"May I?" Hannibal gestured to Jack's aorta, still clutched within the hybrid's claws. Without hesitating, it stopped drinking from the makeshift straw. The hybrid slapped the end of Jack's aorta into Hannibal's open palm.

After you.

"Will," Hannibal said, "are you watching?"

He ran his tongue along the length of the aorta, catching bright beads of blood. Beyond horror, beyond terror and fear, Will was petrified with doubt: he wasn't sure if he could look away.

He saw himself reflected in Dr. Lecter's dark eyes: a vengeful demon of born of mistrust and misery. Next to him, Jack moaned. An abrupt flash of movement occurred in Will's peripheral vision; forcing his attention there. The hybrid skittered across the dining room table on all fours, engaging in obscene tricks of bodily contortion. Upside down, it stared at him.

When Will looked back at Jack, Hannibal was holding his still-beating heart. Gracefully, he slipped the aorta in between his teeth and took a long, hard draught.

"What are you waiting for?" Hannibal whispered to Will, his words damp with Jack's blood. "Kill me."

When Will opened his mouth to reply, the doctor forced the other end of Jack's aorta between his lips.

"See?" Hannibal laughed. "I knew he'd have a hearty consistency."

As he choked on tears of self-disgust, Will dutifully sucked Jack's scarlet essence through the makeshift straw, and couldn't help agreeing with Hannibal: the flavor of his kill was truly exceptional.

***

Mason had gone under almost instantly; offering no resistance to Hannibal's casual suggestion of hypnosis--especially once the idea was thoroughly implanted. After all, Mason had a penchant for drama. To the inexperienced patient, as he indubitably was, hypnosis likely sounded like an amusing diversion. It was Hannibal's first attempt, and so far, the results were better than expected.

Drill in hand, he advanced upon Verger's prone figure. "I could lobotomize you right now, but that would fail to bring me total satisfaction."

He swept his hand close to Mason's closed eyes. The sudden gust of air ruffled the blond mop of hair and obscured half of the man's face; settling unbecomingly across his forehead. Hannibal smiled without his eyes.

"'What these shades could not satisfy in life, in death, they shall be denied for eternity,'" he quoted. "Had you ever studied the incomparable works of Virgil, you would have recognized that line from *Dante's Inferno*."

He paused, titling his head to the side to scrutinize his potential victim. Wrinkling his nose in distaste, Hannibal brushed the hair off Mason's face. Though his features were slack; smoothened by his drug-induced slumber; they maintained a certain structural appeal. His mouth was sensual, ruddy from the constant nervous snaking of his tongue across the expanse of his full lower lip. He looked much younger, the lines disappearing the deeper he relaxed into sleep.

Hannibal frowned; unmoved by Mason's guileless appearance. Despite a fleeting visual appeal, the brother Verger was still a cruel, rough-mannered villain who disrupted the harmony of polite society. Under most other circumstances, Hannibal would have taken Will's advice and done away with his ilk long ago. Jack Crawford and his team of FBI agents, however, had tightened the perimeter of his freedom to hunt as he pleased.

With a burst of purpose, he hovered the drill over Mason's mouth. It would only take seconds to end his life. A more tempting thought there had never before seemed. Curious, Hannibal wondered if Mason would awaken the moment the tool touched the back of his throat, or the moment just after.

Dreamily, he envisioned awakening Mason with the announcement of his plans to cannibalize him; then cut out his scandalous tongue while it was still flapping inside his screaming mouth. After shoving the twitching muscle down Mason's throat and choking him with it, Hannibal would remove the freshly-acquired muscle and properly butcher it. Verger's tongue would work much better as meat than as a platform for his numerous misconceptions, and delusions of his own importance.

Hannibal's eyes rolled back into his head. He took a deep breath, savoring the tableau of the next intimate table pour deux with Will. Mason, his office, and reality faded to grey as he entered the alternate universe his mind provided for him and his muse; alone.

***

In a place that resembled his dining room, somewhere between his memory-palace and his realm of fantasies, a disembodied tenor voice crooned "Non Ti Scordar Di Me." The sound was delightfully soothing. Seated across from Will, Hannibal admired the meticulously crafted, edible art on each of their plates. He sniffed the deliciously pungent air. Cut into bite-sized rectangular shapes, Mason's slow-cooked, quick-seared tongue rested in a pool of mint green gastrique. Smoked grapes and tempura-coated berries boldly accented the dish, brightening it with splashes of hot color. The sour-smoky richness of the tongue, mixed with the acrid gastrique and sour berries, lingered harmoniously inside his olfactory glands.

Hannibal relished the look of delight on Will's face when he placed a bite of the tongue in his mouth.

"*Itadakimasu*," they both said at the same time.

Will tasted his food, chewing it thoroughly before allowing the pulpy meat to slide down his wet throat. He closed his eyes, sighing in pleasure. "This is much better than the beef tongue torchon you served last time."

Hannibal hid a smile behind a sip of Grenache Rosé, the bold choice of wine paired with the big-flavored torchon. "The two dishes are identical."

"Nearly," Will gently corrected him. "I can taste the difference in animal. What's your secret to tenderizing the meat?"

"Passion," Hannibal answered.

Will placed his napkin to his lips, wiping away a droplet of the spicy-sour gastrique. "You're passionate about the meat?"

"When revenge serves as the motivation behind action, it's possible to discover undeveloped facets of the self. I discovered something new about myself tonight."

He paused. Surprised, he felt a rare flicker of uncertainty. He had not expected to experience disempowerment through personal revelation.

"Whose revenge are you carrying out?" Will prompted.

Hannibal found his voice again. "Yours. I know how much you wanted a child."

Abigail stepped out of the shadows. "You already have one," she said. Shyly stepping into a puddle of moonlight, her unmistakable blue eyes found Will's.

Will's fork clattered on the floor. Tears of joyful confusion filled his eyes. "Abigail," he whispered.

Abigail turned her brilliant gaze on Hannibal. "Surprise."

***

Abruptly, Hannibal banished the daydream to the back of his thoughts. He was not ready to reveal Abigail yet. For now, she needed to stay hidden.

"'Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,'" he murmured to his silent audience. He would have to keep biding his time, until Will came to earn his surprise. Until he was absolutely certain that Will's loyalty belonged to him.

"Lucifer's punishment for gluttony is eternal consumption and excretion," Hannibal said. "Fortunately for you, Mason, my reach doesn't extend quite that far."

With a sigh of regret, Hannibal moved the drill away from his potential victim's face. As much as he ached to end the little pig's life, he would have to bide his time. He was not afraid of getting caught, as much as succumbing to impulse. Killing Mason would be an illogical decision, given the scrutiny of the FBI, and Margot as a loose end. He would have to forgo that particular desire until the opportunity presented itself in the future.

"I'll have you for dinner one of these days," he told the still-unconscious Verger. "Or perhaps, your pigs will. Either way, I can promise you this..." Hannibal hovered over him, eyes narrowed in disdain. "It isn't going to end well for you."

His pulse quickened as he uttered the threat--he barely refrained from jamming the drill into Mason's heart. Shaking a little, he walked over to the cabinet where he stored his surgical tools and replaced the drill. After a few moments of deep breathing, he returned to Mason's side, and quickly awakened him.

Mason rubbed his eyes and stretched his arms over his head. "Papa always said wastefulness is morally corrupt."

Hannibal sighed. "Perhaps your Papa had a valid point."

As anticipated, Mason harbored no memory of the hypnosis session. Hannibal inwardly congratulated himself on his success, and briefly envisioned the variety of methods in which he could butcher the sole male Verger heir.

"Waste not, want not," Mason said with an odd little cackle. Always in motion, he adjusted himself in the chair and pushed his glasses higher up on his nose. "Where was I? Oh, yes. Children. Margot can't reproduce anymore."

He beamed. "Such a tragedy."

"Please, Mason," Hannibal said through gritted teeth, "Show a little decorum."

Mason's laughter was raucous. "You are a strange and often hilarious individual."

Hannibal smiled, imagining all the ways in which he could vivisect him and still keep him alive: blind, deaf, and dumb.

After mumbling incoherently a few more agonizing minutes, Mason at last sauntered out the door.

"Until next time, Doc."

Hannibal felt a physical sense of relief when the walking nightmare was finally gone. Still troubled by his earlier lapse in control, he distractedly tidied his desk. When he finished, he paced around the room. He felt restless, unsettled; impatiently waiting for the unexpected visitor, who often appeared to provoke him out of hiding; who could see him more clearly than he could sometimes see himself.

***

Will waited outside the door of Hannibal's house. His pulse was calm. The sudden clarity that came to him erased any persistent doubts. His finger pressed the doorbell buzzer out of habit, but there was no need - Hannibal always knew when to expect him.

When at last the door opened, Will's vision conjured the stag in Hannibal's place.

He stared at the creature. "I don't know how to feel about you."

It stared back at him; waiting.

"But I need your company right now," Will admitted.

The stag dematerialized. Hannibal held the door open wider.

Will's throat was dry: "Just you."

Hannibal smiled. Saying nothing, he answered with his eyes.

Will understood every word they spoke.

Interlude

Chapter Summary

While preparing dinner, Hannibal teaches Will the proper way to wield a knife.

Chapter Notes

This section was not featured in the original work. It is meant to be a palate-cleanser; a bit of lightheartedness before the final descent into bloody betrayal and vicious retribution.

***

Hannibal’s kitchen was spotless, save the neat arrangement of ingredients set beside the heavy wooden chopping block. Fresh herbs, stacked and arranged in perfectly symmetrical piles, emitted refreshing fragrances that helped mask the scent of the raw organs beside them. Wearing a simple black chef’s apron, he sliced carrots, onions, and celery to add to his *mirepoix* for the *court-bouillon* that would marinate his *andouillettes*. After he had finished prepping the sausage's seasoning, Hannibal reached for the pork and began dissecting it. Length-wise slivers of intestine fell effortlessly away from the handmade Japanese knife that fitted to his hand like another appendage.

As he worked, he hummed a lively tune. Choosing a flavor profile for this particular dish had been more difficult than usual, as his mind was occupied by thoughts of Will and Mason Verger. Nevertheless, he had managed to draw inspiration from Will’s unexpected late-night visit the previous Thursday.

The desire to give Will comfort had been his inspiration for their meal tonight. *Andouillettes,* one of his favorite French delicacies, tasted simulataneously decadent and rustic. Hannibal thought the dish would provide a perfect combination of successfully seductive elements. Smiling, he combined the mirepoix with the pieces of sausage; pulse pounding a little harder when he remembered how vulnerable Will had been that night. They had talked for hours about Will's conflicted feelings - his desire to know Hannibal better was greater than his instinct to keep his distance. A few drinks later, Will had almost agreed to stay over, given the long drive home. Much to Hannibal's disappointment, however, his apprentice's dedication to his dogs had taken precedence.

“Patience," he murmured. It took a steady hand to prepare a meal, and his was shaking a little. Tempted to initiate deeper intimacy between them, Hannibal had stopped just short of

kissing Will's cheek as he bid him a longer-than-usual farewell that night. The timing still wasn't right - now that he had his chosen companion by his side again, he would try his best not to frighten Will away. Still, it was becoming increasingly difficult to resist the impulse to touch, as he desired use all of his senses for discovering more pieces of the empath's intricate puzzle. The fact that Will was a man made no difference; what Hannibal had seen of Will's beauty, he wanted to possess.

Lovingly, he wrapped the seasoned chitterlings into the bowels of a banker who had been discourteous when he was opening up a new account. Hannibal smiled fondly at the memory of turning the rude man's paunchy stomach inside out. He grated some fresh pepper and salt, added to the large pot of water boiling on the stove, and set about slicing the shallots. Reaching for the bottle of white cooking wine, Hannibal poured a generous amount into pan; then carefully placed the *andouillettes* into the stock. He placed the lid on top, and made sure the burner was set to low heat.

"*Et puis*," he said to the empty kitchen, "*On attend*."

The *andouillettes* would take at least five hours to absorb all the intricate flavors from the *court-bouillon*. In the meantime, Hannibal needed to prepare for the arrival of his guest. He filled the sink with hot, soapy water, and proceeded to clean his mess. As he did the dishes, he allowed his mind the indulgence of wandering into the realm of fantasy.

Si je n'ai rien de toi, l'espérance me quittera.

If I don't have you, hope will abandon me.

He thought briefly of saying those words aloud to Will - just to observe his reaction - but they weren't quite truthful. After all, Will was already his - though it had taken a long time to win his trust back. Hannibal was loath to take any action that would jeopardize his apprentice's faith in him. But would Will successfully complete his transition from law-abiding citizen to anarchist murderer.

Hannibal lost himself in his devil's advocate thoughts. Should Will ever fall from his graces, life would inevitably continue; but he refused to entertain that scenario. His fantasies were much more alive with a living Will to perpetuate them. Once he revealed his surprise gift of sparing Abigail's life, Hannibal was certain his gesture of good faith would suffice as permanent proof of his devotion. Then, perhaps Will would further lower his inhibitions and accept Hannibal's love in whatever form he offered it. If he didn't, there were always other alternatives.

After finishing the dishes, he wiped the countertops clean; then thoroughly washed his hands and rewarded himself with a glass of 2005 Russiz Superiore Pinot Grigio. He closed his eyes, savoring the wine's dry, crisp taste. Individual flavors - mineral, tart, fruit - burst onto this palate like a lively adagio of textures and tastes. He imagined Will's mercurial blue eyes, and how they darkened when--

The doorbell rang. Hannibal started, and then composed himself. His dinner guest had arrived. Swallowing his smirk of delight with another sip of wine, he set down the glass and strolled leisurely to the front door. Opening it, Hannibal feasted his eyes upon the sight in

front of him: Will Graham in a neatly-pressed navy Oxford shirt and beige khakis; comely in his casual simplicity.

"Fish," said Will, brandishing what smelled like a freshly-butchered package of premium yellowtail.

Hannibal eyed his gift with suspicion. "More accurately, *hamachi*. You didn't catch that."

Will shrugged. "It's fresh enough."

"I suppose I should have told you the theme of tonight's meal was French, but a Japanese-inspired *hors d'oeuvre* will bring a playful element to the table."

"You could always save it for another time," Will suggested.

"Tomorrow, then?"

Will laughed without humor. "Who knows? Mason Verger could make his move before then."

"Then perhaps it's best we incorporate it into tonight's supper." Hannibal gestured towards the kitchen. "The main course is well under way, but I would appreciate some assistance in preparing the appetizer you've provided.″

"Happy to help."

Will's small smile warmed Hannibal more profoundly than any daydreams of physical intimacy.

***

After retrieving the utensils necessary for preparing the hamachi, Hannibal offered Will his glass of unfinished Russiz Superiore. "Care for a taste?"

Will's hesitation was brief, but noticeable. Still, he took the proffered sip. "It's delicious."

"Pleased to hear it." Hannibal thrilled at the sight of Will's drinking from his glass.

His former patient took another sip, and then offered it back. "Thank you. Maybe I can have my own glass next time."

Impulsively, Hannibal brushed Will’s bangs off his forehead. His fingertips came away damp. “You’re sweating.”

Will flinched. “It’s a little warm in here."

Hannibal raised an eyebrow at him, but made no comment. Instead, he gave him a clean hand towel. Will muttered his thanks and mopped away the light beading of sweat from his forehead. Stealthily, Hannibal watched him, making a mental note to scent the towel's aroma later; in private.

He handed Will a 12-inch Bunmei knife. "We need to have a serious discussion about Mason Verger."

Begrudgingly, he accepted the knife. “Let's not and say we did."

Hannibal couldn't bear to watch him hold it so awkwardly. "Take the handle, and get a good, firm grip on it."

Will looked amused. “I think I know how to use a knife.”

“This is no ordinary knife. It’s as much a tool as it is a work of art.”

“It’s as much a weapon as it is a tool.”

“What kind of weapon would you prefer to use?”

Will put the down the knife. Cheekily, he held up his hands.

“I should have thought as much,” Hannibal responded. He looked more closely at Will's hands. “Your wounds are healing well. There’s only a faint impression of the damage left behind by the death of Randall Tier."

“By the murder of Randall Tier,” Will corrected. "His death was far from ordinary."

“And you honored him as he could never have dreamed." He pointed to the unwrapped *hamachi*. "Nourish the body to feed the soul.”

Will shook his head. “I think my soul needs more than a delicious meal to save it.”

"Saving your soul is another matter entirely, and one I find highly debatable at that."

"So we'll just carry on casually, as if lives weren't hanging in the precipice?" A touch of fear crept into Will's eyes. "As if Mason Verger weren't moments away from sending his goons here to kill us?"

Hannibal peered at him. "Do my efforts to provide your body with rich sustenance, and expand your sense of self, mean nothing to you?"

"Just the opposite," Will reassured. "Your efforts make the experience all the more meaningful.”

Hannibal took a step closer. “May I show you how it’s done?”

Will smirked. "By all means, Doctor Lecter. Show me how it’s done.”

Hannibal’s sleeve brushed the edge of Will’s arm when he took another step forward.

“Take the knife,” he instructed.

Will obeyed.

Taking care not to startle him, Hannibal placed his right hand on top of Will's. “Grip it firmly - not too tightly.”

He tapped the top of Will’s hand as if admonishing a wayward child. “Your knuckles are turning white. Relax.”

“I'm not even sure I know the meaning of that word anymore,” Will muttered. After a moment, his knuckles returned to their normal color.

“Good," Hannibal praised. "I hope you don't mistrust my intentions."

“Wouldn’t I be a fool not to harbor some lingering suspicion? You’ve killed more people than anyone I know.”

“Sometimes, people deserve to die. But not you, Will. I want you around for as long as possible.”

He leaned in, taking in the light scent of Will’s freshly-shampooed hair. *Sublime notes of citrus with a hint of sweet sweat*, he thought. *Lovely*.

Will allowed the closeness for a few moments before clearing his throat and shifting awkwardly from one foot to the next.

“The fish isn’t going to cut itself.”

“Right you are,” Hannibal agreed. “So please pay attention.”

He snaked his other arm around Will’s body and placed it on top of the hand holding the *hamachi;* taking care not to leave a slight space between them so that Will could not clearly read his intentions.

“The first slice is very important. It's crucial to ensure that the cut possesses the right thicknes."

Will flicked his eyes over his shoulder. “Noted.”

Hannibal felt Will's hand hesitate beneath his. “Don’t waver - confidence is key."

“Too much confidence is gauche."

Together, they sliced the *hamachi* into paper-thin pieces. Hannibal studied Will's technique. "A little less hesitation would improve your speed."

Will paused. "Whatever happened to, 'slow and steady, wins the race'?"

"The real ending of the story was that tortoise won because the hare got eaten."

"That's extremely morbid," Will chuckled.

"Please pay attention." Gently, Hannibal applied more pressure to Will's hand, urging him to continue slicing. "The food we consume deserves our utmost respect. Especially once it is..." he trailed off, hoping Will would finish his sentence with the exact words he was thinking.

"Transformed."

Hannibal's breath caught in his throat. "You're a quick study. Firmly believing in one's own abilities is crucial to success."

Will cleared his throat. "I think I can finish this myself."

Reluctantly, Hannibal removed his hands from Will's. "It's clear you require no further instruction."

"It's arguable whether or not I ever needed instruction."

"You're full of combative responses today."

"Allow me to apologize." Will's tone was tinged with playful sarcasm. "I forgot my manners at the door."

Hannibal smiled. He wanted to close the gap between them, and show Will what else he could teach him, but he must continue to exercise restraint. The temptations his former patient presented to him were difficult to overcome; however, Hannibal had expert control over his impulses.

As usual, the moment of possibility passed by without a word. Privately, however, the besotted Hannibal Lecter was ever scheming: dreaming up new ways to carve his name into Will's each and every waking thought, until they were left breathing only each other's air; their surrogate daughter looking on with blind devotion for her loving fathers - a family; all together at last.

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They sat across from each other at the dining table, finishing the final bites of the sashimi-inspired appetizer they had prepared with the *hamachi*.

"Delicious," Hannibal praised. "It tastes like it came straight from the Pacific earlier this morning."

"Exaggeration for effect results in unnecessary flattery," Will remarked after a sip of white wine.

"I don't believe the flattery to be unnecessary when it tells a truth."

"It figures you would say that."

Hannibal quirked his lips. "Are you psychoanalyzing me, Will?"

Will raised his glass. "I learned from the best."

"I do appreciate your wit." With a flourish, Hannibal uncovered the main course. "Are you ready for your first taste of *andouillettes*?"

Will looked doubtful. "Judging by the smell, I'm not entirely sure I have the stomach for it."

Hannibal gestured to the covered silver dish in the middle of the table. "Well, *he* certainly did."

Will raised an eyebrow. "Long pig again?"

"Half and half," Hannibal confided in him. "The sausage casing and its innards come from two different sources."

Taking his knife and fork in hand, Will stared at the piping-hot, dark brown tripe. "I suppose it's an acquired taste?"

Hannibal served him the largest piece; then, he spooned a generous portion of vegetables and broth over the *andouillette*. "The only way to discover the taste is to try it for yourself."

As Will cut into the savory sausage, his nostrils flared. "It smells very..."

"Gamey?"

"Strong."

"Not everyone enjoys the flavor, but I have confidence in your evolving palate."

Will took a bite. His face changed.

Hannibal leaned forward. "What's your opinion?"

Swallowing, Will granted him a grin. "It's one of the strangest things I've ever had in my mouth."

"Just wait," Hannibal promised him. "This is only the beginning."

Labyrinth

Chapter Summary

After teaching Mason Verger a lesson in greed, Hannibal tests Will to gauge his true feelings about their unique relationship.

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The sunlight sparkled on the water's deep blue surface. Prisms of color scattered like jewels, softly bathing Abigail's beatific features in radiant light. Smiling brilliantly, she cast out her line, flinging a noose-like shadow above the glittering river.

Will watched her progress with silent approval. As Abigail whipped the line, he took a deep whiff of her scent – innocent, light, airy – a fitting disguise for the killer who lurked beneath her girlish appearance. *She even had me fooled*, Will thought. *Or maybe I was just willfully blind*.

The red-orange lure skimmed the water's undulating surface, enticing the unsuspecting fish below with the promise of flesh. Briefly, Will flashed back to the memories of discovering Garret Jacob Hobbs' grisly keepsakes of his victims. He glanced at Abigail, frowning.

She helped him set the table, and then pulled up a chair.

Thoughts of Abigail's hidden darkness dispelled when the line suddenly jerked.

She gasped in surprise. "I got a bite!"

"You're a natural," Will replied. Amused, he watched her struggle with the potential catch.

"Beginner's luck," she claimed. "Or maybe I just have a really great teacher - hey!" She let out a startled laugh as the unseen fish tugged the line taut again. "This one's stronger than the others. Feels like a monster."

"Need some help?" Will offered. He squinted into the sunlight as Abigail's shadow struggled with the fish.

She shook her head back and forth, and adjusted her grip on the pole. "Let me try first, Dad."

"I'm not your Dad," Will said. His tone was wistful.

Abigail turned her soulful blue gaze on him. "Not yet."

A mixture of hope and happiness washed over him. "What do you mean?"

“He’s trying to get away!” Abigail interrupted. Adjusting her stance for a better grip, she spread her legs apart and tensed all the muscles in her body; ready to claim her prize.

Ignoring the unexpected twinge of fear in his gut, Will proudly watched her reel in the catch.

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When he awoke, he tried to hold on for the dream as long as possible, before the greyness of reality stole his vision of the life he could have lived, had Hannibal declined to play *deus ex machina*, and refrained from taking Abigail away from him forever.

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Hannibal blinked back droplets of blood from the cut above his eye. His forehead shone with a light beading of sweat. The room’s dim lighting barely concealed his look of controlled fury. Clenching his jaw, he added the final ingredients to his new prescription, specially prepared for a certain Verger.

“So here we are again, Mason. Just the pair of us.”

He glared down at Mason Verger’s unconscious form. “The Sards didn’t make it.”

Hannibal's whole body ached from the various physical confrontations he had endured over the past few hours. Even his bones felt sore. Still, he silently congratulated himself for the victory that had emerged from the gruesome scene left behind. He had hesitated to abandon Will in the midst of the carnage, but his intuition hinted that if his partner awoke to a scene of horrific uncertainty, home was the first place he would go.

Home was where Hannibal intended to greet him – with Mason as a surprise guest.

“I wonder what the new Will Graham will do,” he wondered aloud, “when I introduce him to the new you.”

One of the pigs he had brought into the house nudged the back of his knee.

“Yes,” he said, scratching the pig behind the ears. “Waiting is a difficult task when one has a lack of patience. But it won’t be much longer.”

He nodded towards Mason. “I’m about to awaken the sleeping prince.”

Armed with the fully-loaded oxygen mask, he strode over to Mason’s side. He bent down, speaking directly into Mason’s ear.

“I find you distasteful, vulgar, and my contempt of you is overwhelming. I want you to suffer.”

Hannibal lifted the corners of his mouth. “But you won’t feel any pain until much later. For the next few hours, you’ll experience nothing but sheer delight.”

He paused a moment before administering the specially prepared psychedelic drug cocktail to his least favorite patient.

“Now, Mason,” Hannibal said, “let me help you change the way you see yourself.”

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Will was wandering down his driveway when he came back into his own mind. Frowning, he squinted at the harsh glare of approaching headlights and instinctively covered his eyes with one hand. The car halted in front of him with a screech of brakes. A streak of déjà-vu flashed through him, and then numbness settled comfortably over him with foggy calm.

“Will?” A man’s familiar voice was saying. “Will?”

He winced. “Jack?”

“Jesus, Will,” Jack muttered. “What the hell are you doing out here?”

Squinting, he discerned Jack’s hulking form in front of him. “Lost in thought, I guess.”

He attempted to open his eyes. His eyelids twitched at the effort, but refused to open wider than slits. The car’s headlights burned his eyes like the sun. Whimpering, he massaged his scalp. The hammering headache wouldn’t go away. Mason’s Sardinian sidekick had known what he was doing when he knocked Will out.

“I have a concussion,” he sluggishly realized.

Jack sighed. “Why am I not surprised?”

He shined his pocket flashlight in Will’s eyes. Will pushed him away, groaning in pain.

Undeterred, Jack threw his arm over Will’s shoulder. “Looks like you’re right. Let’s get you inside before somebody sees you.”

“That’s the last place I want to be right now.”

“You may not want to be there.” Jack said grimly, “but I have to make sure you and Dr. Lecter cleaned up your mess.”

He paused for a moment; then bitterly added, “Again.”

“You shouldn’t have come, Jack," Will muttered. "It’s too risky.”

“It’s not like I have a choice. Mason Verger, remember?”

“All too clearly.”

Will vividly remembered how Mason had looked, salivating over strips of flesh, crunching, grinding, up the gristle of his own nose; chuckling thickly as he analyzed the taste of himself.

His gorge rose. Gagging, he vomited onto the driveway. The contents of his stomach made a stomach-churning splash.

Instinctively, Jack turned his head to the side, avoiding the sour odor. “Feeling better now?”

Trembling, Will wiped his mouth with the back of his cold hand and straightened up his shoulders. “Just needed to get that out of my system, I guess.”

Jack stared at him without humor. “You owe me at least ten explanations for tonight’s..." He gritted his teeth. “...unfortunate turn of events.”

Will spat onto the driveway. “I’d rather not relive my failure in all its bloody glory.”

“Right now, I don’t care what you want,” Jack seethed. He started walking again, dragging Will with him towards the house. Waves of fury rolled off his broad build. “We’re this close to catching Hannibal, and I won’t let you screw it up.”

Will licked his lower lip with a dry tongue. “You won’t catch him, Jack.”

Jack stopped walking. “That’s not what I want to hear.”

“I know.”

“Hey,” Jack peered into his face. The worry in his eyes barely hid his fear. “Are you still with me, Will?”

“I’m with you. It’s just...” Will changed tactics. “You won’t catch him without a fight. He’ll do anything he can not to get caught. He’ll kill you, Jack, and dine on the part of you he most admires - your heart.”

Jack resumed the trek to the house, not bothering to wait for Will to follow.

“Will, I’ve been doing this job for all of my adult life. I know the risks,” he said over his shoulder. “I’m sorry to say this, but I’m really questioning your ability to rein him in.”

Reluctantly, Will followed him, still trying to shake off his nausea. "I've got Hannibal Lecter under my thumb, Jack.”

Still walking, Jack called, “How can you be sure?”

“The way he—" Will stopped himself. He didn’t want Jack to know more than necessary. “The way he confides in me. He’s unfurling.”

Jack slowed down enough for Will to catch up.

“We can’t waste time, Will. Every moment that passes us by is a loss. We have to act soon - before he slips away.”

Will pulled his glasses off, rubbing the reddened bridge of his nose. “If I push him too hard, he might see my hand before I’m ready to reveal it.”

“He might have already seen what you’re working with. Like Du Maurier said, he’s cunning.”

“He’s clever,” Will admitted, “But he’s not seeing the whole picture. I’ve worked myself into his blind spot.”

“What if that’s just what he’s letting you think?”

Will wiped his glasses with the unsoiled portion of his shirt. “I have a pretty keen understanding of how Hannibal Lecter thinks.”

He had never seen Jack look so serious.

“You might be on the right track,” Jack said. He gripped Will’s arm. “But what if you’re wrong?”

Will wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “If I’m wrong,” he said grimly, “then Mason Verger’s new face is the least of your concerns.”

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Hannibal closed his eyes, concentrating on the music’s melody. On his office desk, a beautifully restored gramophone played Dvorak’s “O Silver Moon” a little too loudly. Will glanced at him, expecting him to show annoyance at the mildly unpleasant pitch. He wasn’t disappointed – a few moments later, Hannibal approached the gramophone and removed the needle from the disc.

His lips thinned. “I don’t think this selection fits the occasion.”

“I don’t know if I can stand the silence right now,” Will muttered. His eyelids fluttered. “Even though it’s been days, I can still hear the sound of Mason Verger crunching on his own nose. Why didn’t you just kill him?”

“He proved himself to be undeserving of mercy,” Hannibal reminded him. Instead of selecting another piece of music, he walked around to the other side of his desk, restlessly fiddling with some papers.

“Mason Verger is rotten to the core,” Will agreed, “but I’m having trouble…digesting his fate. What was the point of leaving him alive?”

Hannibal’s eyes gleamed. “Curiosity.”

“Entertainment,” Will shot back.

Touching his lips to drops of liqueur clinging to the rim of his glass, Hannibal took a conservative sip of Chartreuse. He sighed in pleasure as he swallowed. “Satisfaction tastes like Chartreuse. It’s clean, smooth…” he paused, eyeing the fetching green beverage. “Joyfully verdant.”

Will smelled his drink. Potent with flowers and herbs, the Chartreuse had an intriguing, if slightly medicinal odor. He took an experimental sip. At once, his palate awakened to the assertive, pungent taste of myriad flowers, plants, and herbs; sweetly chilled to perfection.

Will raised his glass in Hannibal's direction. "You're a gifted weaver of words."

With a slight smile, Hannibal returned the gesture. "Use your own gift, Will."

Seeing the confusion on Will's face, he clarified: "Step inside my mind, and grant me a revelation."

"After you," Will countered.

Hannibal nodded. "I'll consent, provided you'll return the favor."

Will's lips creaked into a rusty grin. "Don't worry – I'm good for it."

Hannibal's tongue darted out. He licked his upper lip clean, and briefly closed his eyes. After a few moments of thought, he asked, "Why do you focus on distant memories of pain, while you're so enthralled by the events of the present?"

Will rubbed the day-old stubble on his chin. "I don't know how distant the memory of pain is. It's just masked by the distraction of the moment."

"Then let me ask you this – which poses a greater distraction: the thought of killing, or the way it makes you feel when you fantasize about doing it?"

"My thought process has altered. Those two concepts are one and the same."

"Perhaps it hasn't altered, but revealed its true form. Murder has been ever present on your mind, Will. For so long, you struggled with that knowledge."

"Are you reading my mind, or projecting your own desires?" Will squinted at him. "You are well-versed in the art of persuasion."

"My job as your psychiatrist is to guide you down the right path."

Will didn't need to shift his gaze to know that Hannibal was watching him closely. Ever aware of appearances, he forced himself to shut down the part of his brain that wanted him to get lost in it.

"Mason Verger deserved to die for what he did to Margot and—"

He winced. "And for what he did to the baby."

Hannibal peered down at the desk, scrutinizing his rendering of Nikolai Ge's *Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus*.

"Then I'll ask you the same question you asked me - why didn't you kill him, Will? I gave you the perfect opportunity to avenge your loss."

Will drained his drink. “I thought you were going to do it,” he said, clenching the glass. “I was certain you would, after you were done playing with him.”

“Ah, therein lies your error of judgment,” Hannibal explained. He tilted his head to the side, studying his depiction of Ge's masterpiece in further detail. “For all your intuition, you still can’t see clearly through my eyes.”

"Light enters the pupils, but darkness absorbs it,” Will said, staring at flames flickering in the fireplace. He felt Hannibal's glance sweep over him.

“The light touches all of you – an exquisite vision to behold.”

Will held out his empty glass. "Lubrication generates inspiration," he joked, hoping to deflect Hannibal’s unwanted flattery.

“Your wit is especially sharp tonight,” Hannibal observed, unsmiling. He didn’t move to refill Will’s beverage.

Will grinned, hoping to coax Hannibal into lightheartedness. “Must have been something I ate.”

Hannibal raised his eyebrows. “Or didn’t eat.”

“A small mercy,” Will said. The warm, heady buzz of alcohol dulled some of his senses and heightened others. Soberly, he reminded himself to keep his mental guard up. Hannibal’s influence usually became stronger once the spirits were in his system.

If Hannibal noticed his uneasiness, he didn’t comment.

“Mason seemed to enjoy himself immensely.” His eyes glinted like cold metal. “Perhaps you missed an occasion to further broaden your palate.”

“I’ll venture to state that I probably wouldn’t have enjoyed the taste.”

Hannibal continued to silently watch him. Will tried to counter-observe him, but in this particular moment, head spinning from his quick consumption of the 110-proof-Chartreuse, the mercurial Dr. Lecter was unreadable. Still, Will had a sinking feeling about his companion’s intentions.

“You’re hiding again, Will,” Hannibal said after a moment. Lightly, he rapped the top of the desk with his knuckles. “Remember the advice I gave when you killed Randall?”

A vivid flashback of Hannibal’s skilled, steady surgeon’s hands bathing the wounds he had incurred during the death battle conjured up the memory of their conversation.

“‘Don’t go inside,’” he murmured.

Hannibal nodded. “At times, it’s easy to forget your definition of horror does not resemble my own,” he remarked. “You need a little more experience in order to numb yourself to the unpleasantness that accompanies dismantling the human body.”

“You certainly don’t shy away from the grotesque.”

“There is beauty in madness," Hannibal said. He held up his drawing to the light to examine it at a different angle. "You were stunning in the throes of encephalitis. The illness enhanced your empathy.”

Will snorted. “Close to death, I was nothing more than a meat-coated bag of bones, aimlessly shuffling around – desperate for somebody to take pity and put me out of my misery.”

“Will.”

Something in the tone of Hannibal's voice made Will look at him. Through liquor-blurred eyes, he watched Hannibal's features come sharply into focus. All at once, Hannibal stood in front of him, their bodies nearly touching.

Hannibal took his face in both hands.

“Let me reassure you of this,” he murmured, leaning down, “In death, you will be nothing less than a divine vision.”

Will’s breath faltered when Hannibal’s warm lips brushed his temple. They were close enough for Will to notice the fine, dark grains of stubble on Hannibal's cheeks and chin. Close enough – more than close enough - for Will to smell the Chartreuse on his quickened breath.

Hannibal ran his fingers through Will's hair. “Through the annihilation of your corporeal self, you will achieve perfection,” he said, stroking. “Annihilation breeds the highest form of art.”

All the voices in his head screamed at him to flee. Instead, he stood frozen in place, wondering if Hannibal had slipped something into his drink so as render him powerless.

He drugged Mason. What’s to stop him from doing the same to me?

Hannibal mistook Will’s immobility for permission to continue. Dancing his fingertips along the edge of Will's cheekbones, he closed his eyes and deeply inhaled. The tip of his tongue darted out, between his lips. “The scent of your skin is heady.” His fingers traced Will’s jaw, moving towards his mouth. “Intoxicating.”

Hannibal’s whispered breath across Will's flushed face sparked an unwelcome sensation. Jolting in alarm, Will finally broke the spell of his immobility. He placed his hands on Hannibal’s shoulders and quickly pushed him away - a little harder than necessary. Hannibal stumbled. As he grabbed the edge of the desk to steady himself, he gave Will a wounded look.

“What was that?” Will demanded, unable to keep the sharpness out of his voice.

Hannibal’s cheeks wore the ghost of a blush. He straightened his tie. “I got lost in the moment.”

“The moment?”

Hannibal gestured at the drawing on his desk. “You are the image of Patroclus.”

Will stared at him. “Did you think you could—?”

“I was merely paying you a compliment,” Hannibal interrupted. “I’m sorry you did not appreciate it.”

Turning his back to Will, he smoothed down the creases in his grey wool trousers. His sigh of disappointment was undetectable, but Will sensed it nonetheless. The nagging voice of self-doubt reappeared in the form of Jack’s deep baritone. *You’ve never been the fisherman. He’s got you right where he wants you—in a position of vulnerability. He’s testing the bait.*

He wondered why he almost felt guilty for rejecting Hannibal’s overtures. *Then again*, Jack reminded him, *one of Dr. Lecter’s special abilities is emotional manipulation*.

In his mind’s eye, Jack faded away, replaced by Abigail’s haunted blue gaze. *Don’t forget – the monster wants every part of you*, her phantom whispered. *He’ll save the best parts for last.*

But first, Garret Jacob Hobbs' echo chuckled, *he’ll enjoy the hors d’oeuvres*.

Though he hardly had neither the stomach, nor the natural proclivity, to seduce another man, Will knew he had to at least keep Hannibal infatuated in order to fortify his own sense of self-preservation. He could see no other way to retain the monster’s trust. Still, the charged moment between them had been precariously real; the lines of real and pretend were blurring together.

“Hannibal,” Will heard himself saying.

Hannibal cocked his head to the side, listening. Will peered at the doctor's left hand, which was clenching and unclenching into a fist. Clearly, his dissatisfaction with the abrupt change of atmosphere was causing him physical discomfort.

Will lowered his own hands to his sides, making sure to affect a non-adversarial stance. At this crucial point in their game of cat-and-mouse, he needed to tread more carefully than before. If he lost focus, he would lose himself. The labyrinth of lies he had woven himself into would not relinquish the light to point him the way to a safe exit. He would explore the maze’s twists and turns until arriving at the end passage - where the hybrid waited, like the minotaur, to usher him into the permanent darkness.

Always tempt him with the promise of more, Jack had said during one of their recent conversations. Will had vowed not to disappoint him, so he repeated Hannibal’s name, making sure to leave a slight question in his voice.

Hannibal waited a few seconds before turning around to face him. He wore a guarded look of disinterest, and his coloring had returned to normal. “Yes?”

Will tried to soften his features, but it was impossible.

“Don’t you have any boundaries?” he asked, trying to affect a casual tone of voice. “A certain degree of separation needs to remain in effect.”

Hannibal furrowed his brows. “What purpose would reenacting walls between us serve?”

“The purpose of respect,” Will patiently explained. “Our relationship is already confusing enough. Perhaps you should take a step back and apply yourself to my perspective,” he suggested.

“Whatever mechanism you want to use to keep your walls in place, you’ll not succeed,” Hannibal dismissed. Stepping forward, he pressed his hand against Will’s chest. “I’ve already taken up residence in here.”

Will felt his heart pounding against Hannibal’s palm. “What are you implying?”

“You let me in.”

“You forced your way in,” he argued. Will felt his control slipping away again.

“I find you appealing for many reasons,” Hannibal said, removing his hand. He feigned adjusting his cufflinks. “You continue to show me pieces of myself I never knew existed.”

“Wonderful,” Will sneered. “So you’re using me to exorcise your demons.”

Hannibal looked offended. “I sincerely hope you don’t view our relationship as such.”

“Every relationship needs boundaries. Apparently, this one has none, which is a definite problem.”

Suddenly, Hannibal clenched a fistful of his shirt. The fabric tightened uncomfortably around Will’s neck. He gasped.

“Will, look at me,” Hannibal commanded.

He didn’t want to obey, yet he met Hannibal’s eyes after only a moment’s hesitation. Bottomless, the monster’s hypnotic gaze sucked him into the vortex and he was lost in the anaesthetizing blackness.

“Nobody else will ever understand you the way I do,” Hannibal told him. His gaze deepened. “Nobody else will ever know you, see you like I can. As I told you before – as you willingly admitted - we are just alike.”

Will almost forgot the role he was playing. “We are just alike - except for the fact that I don’t murder people for sport,” he shot back.

The muscles in Hannibal’s jaw twitched. “Are you certain of that?” he demanded.

Will gritted his teeth. “What do you have to gain from further insinuating yourself inside my head?”

“The more I learn about you, the more I want to know.” Hannibal's hungry expression reflected his covetousness. "I need to know all of you, Will."

“That’s not friendship,” Will argued. “That’s obsession.”

Surprise swept across Hannibal’s features before he could suppress it. A moment later, his usual stoic look resurfaced. Seeming to regain control of his anger, he released his grip on Will’s shirt.

“I find you interesting. Your extraordinary mind holds no end of fascinating possibilities.”

Will nodded, understanding what Hannibal left unspoken. “I’m a human specimen for your inquisitive mind to study at length.”

“You are a most exhilarating companion,” Hannibal said. ”It fascinates me to no end that, after all I’ve shown you about yourself...”

He pointed his index finger at Will. “You remain fundamentally unaware of your own appeal.”

“That’s your job, isn’t it, Doctor Lecter?" he retorted, with a flash of defiance. "To reinforce my self-esteem?”

“I will take your flippancy as code for gratitude," Hannibal almost growled. Blinking back his insult, he said, much more calmly, "Our paths were meant to cross. You can’t cheat eventuality, Will.”

“Nor would I try,” Will whispered. The bass beats of his heart hammered against his ribcage. Again, he felt the fear of death creep into the center of his thoughts.

“When Jack knows the truth, he’ll not cease until he’s cuffed and collared us.” Hannibal’s tone increased in urgency. “We’ll leave before that happens,” he continued. “You must place your trust in me.”

Will narrowed his eyes. “Don’t you believe I trust you by now?”

Hannibal was silent. Will supposed this was the answer he had been looking for all along. He would have to go a hair closer to the edge of the precipice before he pushed the monster into the abyss.

“Remember when we enacted the Masonic ritual,” he said, appealing to Hannibal's sense of whimsy. He tried his best to keep the icy edge from creeping from his tone. “I put my trust in you then, and no harm came to me.”

Hannibal opened his palms. “And no harm shall ever come to you—”

“As long as I remain in your good graces.”

Hannibal’s features darkened. “As long as you don’t deceive me.”

“You've lied to me on countless occasions.”

“I’ve kept secrets from you,” Hannibal admitted. “but always with your best interest in mind.”

“So you continue to affirm.”

Hannibal’s jaw tightened. "'If you want to keep a secret, you must also hide it from yourself.'"

Will saw evidence of an old wound trying to surface.

“Hannibal,” he said reassuringly, “your secrets are safe with me.”

Their eyes met. Will felt Hannibal analyzing his features for dishonesty. After a sweat-inducing pause, he inwardly breathed a sigh of relief as Hannibal softened his scrutiny. The corners of his mouth twitched into a faint smirk.

“You never fail to amuse me,” Hannibal said. Affectionately, he clapped Will’s shoulder. “Another Chartreuse?”

A twinge of foreboding crossed his mind, but as Hannibal expertly poured him another dram of green fire, he dismissed the alarm of his inner voice.

“A toast,” Hannibal said, handing him one of the two drinks he held carefully by the stem. “To solidarity. No matter the odds against us, we shall persevere.”

“To perseverance.” *I will not stop until I catch him*, he silently reminded himself. “Cheers.”

They clinked glasses. Will swallowed a long draught. The herbaceous liqueur burned a cool trail down his throat. He sighed in pleasure, and closed his eyes. “Hits the spot.”

Hannibal nodded. “I expected as much.”

Will tilted his glass from side to side, studying the Chartreuse’s viridescent prisms. “It’s not every day that I allow myself to indulge in a centuries-old liqueur produced by secretive Carthusian monks."

They both chuckled. As the tension between them eased, Will privately grieved the looming loss of their companionship. The man beside him had become more than his prized catch. His fishing attempt might have failed, and it was too late to change his tactics now.

Perhaps, he heard the hybrid’s eerie voice whisper, *you have already lost*.

Thoughtfully, Hannibal stroked his chin. “Jack absolutely deserves the truth. In which case, we must prepare for an imminent departure."

Will swallowed hard. The lump in his throat refused to budge. “We should start making plans.”

“No need,” Hannibal said. His tongue darted out to catch an errant drop of Chartreuse. “I’ve been making plans for ages now.”

“We don’t have much time. Jack’s caught a good whiff of our scents," Will said. "It won’t be long before he sets his dogs on us.”

Hannibal stared at the multitude of hardback treasures on the shelves of his vast library. He gestured around the room with his glass.

“We'll leave all this behind,” he declared. "Start a new life." The resolution in his voice needed no embellishment. "As for our friend Jack..."

He paused to take another delicate sip of Chartreuse. "Unfortunately, for Jack Crawford, the end is nigh.”

Closing his eyes, Will focused on the pitter-patter of raindrops splattering the roof. His third eye opened as he discriminated the water’s melodic timpani. He forced his inner eye to open wider. The drops of rain grew noisier; less musical. As Will watched, the loud, red rain dripped through the floorboards and splashed onto the unblemished surface below; sizzling like acid as it dropped.

Somewhere distant - in a faraway corner of his mind - he could faintly discern the urgent ticking of an ill-fated clock that was counting down; nearly out of time.

Liebestod

Chapter Summary

When Hannibal discovers Will's betrayal, he plots to bid him a farewell that his former friend won't necessarily remember.

Chapter Notes

Updated 5/15/16 to include RST. This version of the original chapter has a significantly different ending than the first.

Warning: dub-con elements, but no rape.

*English Translation of Wagner's "Liebestod (Mild und leise)" by Paula Hanson

"Liebestod" means "love death."

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Hannibal's hands shook. Pouring himself a glass of Pomerol, he didn't wait to take in the Merlot's black-fruited scent before swallowing a large mouthful. This crudeness was out-of-the-ordinary, but the impulse to numb his pain was too strong to ignore. Will's betrayal sickened him. He been with Freddie Lounds, who was supposed to be dead - by his hand, no less. By now, she would have been well-digested, and returned to the earth from whence life originates, to start the cycle of rebirth; but the ghost of the past yet lived, in all her loud, cheap glory - disturbing the peace and crushing Hannibal's vision of family with the blatant evidence of her baffling existence.

He lied to me, and I believed every word.

Scenting her on Will earlier that day had caused Hannibal a pain inside him unlike any sensation he had experienced in a long while. The shattered shards of his heart were like shrapnel, abrasive against the grave inner wound he had incurred whilst under the spell of his muse's epic deceit. Will had never been his. He was Jack's man; conspiring to take away Hannibal's freedom all along.

He poured himself another glass of wine. *I could kill him tonight.* Immediately, he banished the thought, and took another tasteless gulp. He struggled to compose himself. As much as he wanted to enact his revenge, he wasn't ready to end Will's life; not yet. First, he decided to try

one last tactic: to casually suggest an alternative option to his two-faced apprentice, and hope that he would remain unable to resist Hannibal's offer of a new life together - away from Jack, Alana, Freddie Lounds, and all that stood between them.

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Under the pretense of gathering a few final pieces of evidence, Hannibal convinced Will to drive to his office after the elaborate feast he had prepared for tonight's version of their last supper. With sad resolution, he decided that it was almost time to end their tempestuous acquaintance. His efforts to convince Will to leave with him that night had failed. No amount of intelligence, beauty, or deviance would ever make up for the fact that his partner could not admit his own duplicity.

During the meal, Will had imbibed less than his usual amount of alcohol, and even refused Hannibal's offer of an after-dinner cordial. Nevertheless, Hannibal ignored his protests; easily coercing him to stay for their last drink together in the space that had become their secretive lair. As Will walked to the window, his clear eyes searching the skies for stars, Hannibal's heart ached painfully in his chest. He had not experienced this intense form of unhappiness in a long while. He reached for the bottle of Cinnamon Agrosan, a premium rosolio he had thoughtfully chosen for tonight's digestif. The taste was so overwhelming; he felt certain that a layman like Will would harbor no suspicion about the safety of his drink.

So here we are, he thought. *The moment of truth has come and gone, and Will Graham failed to pass the test.*

Will faced away from him, still gazing out the window at the sky. Hannibal fingered the little packet of powder in his pocket. The timing was right. Swiftly, he removed the packed and poured its contents into Will's glass. He poured a generous shot of the Agrosan on top, then quickly stirred it, pocketed the empty packet, and whisked the stirrer stick out of sight.

Before giving Will the drug-laced drink, he tried once more to convince him to keep the inevitable from occurring.

"Will."

Turning around, Will gave him a slight smile. "Hannibal."

"I have a proposition for you."

He heard the somberness in his own tone; the hint of pleading shaming him, but he was wont to change it. The emotion he usually kept cleverly veiled proved too strong to conceal, given the circumstances.

Will eyed the drink in Hannibal's hand. "You sound very serious."

"Come back to my house," Hannibal suggested, trying his best to affect a casual air. "Spend the night. It's too late to drive back to Wolf Trap at this hour. I wouldn't want you falling asleep at the wheel."

"Not a problem," Will assured him. "I'll just pull over if I get too tired."

"Tomorrow's an important day. Don't you think you should be well-rested?" Hannibal pressed. It took a great deal of effort to keep the note begging from entering his voice.

"Ideally...." Will's voice trailed off. An instant of hesitation followed before he finished, "But I can only stay for one more drink, and then I have to get home."

Before Hannibal could stop him, Will had grabbed the Agrosan from his hand. Draining it in one gulp, he winced at the fiery burn.

Hannibal watched him closely. "There are plenty of places for you to rest. I keep the guest quarters comfortable and well-maintained."

"I've no doubt of that," Will said. He stroked his chin. "But I have to let my dogs out at some point."

"I'm sure they'll be fine," Hannibal tried to assure him. "It's just one night. After tomorrow, you won't be around to care for them, anyway."

Will's expression darkened. "Don't remind me."

"Try not to worry so much," Hannibal said, keeping his tone light-hearted. "Knowing Alana, she'll still be compelled to look after them, no matter the gravity of your offense."

Will frowned. "I doubt that."

"Or," Hannibal suggested, "does she yet remain fearful of your dark side?"

Will shrugged. "It's hard to read her emotions. I definitely don't feel comfortable asking her for any favors, though."

"No, I thought not."

Will set his empty glass down on the table, rubbing his eyes. "Thank you for the hospitality, but I'd like to spend one last night alone with my dogs. Who knows when I'll be able to do that again?"

Hannibal pretended to sip his drink. The Agrosan was merely for show. He needed all of his faculties tonight.

"When you're surrounded by the warm comfort of your animals, you sleep well?" he queried.

"As well as can be expected," Will evenly replied. "Sometimes, living alone is lonely."

He took a step towards Hannibal. "Isn't it?" His eyes were searching.

"It can be," Hannibal admitted. "Especially for people like us."

Will gave him a hard look. For a moment, Hannibal almost feared he had discovered his ruse. Then, the crinkles around the corners of Will's eyes softened and his mouth turned down. He looked lovely sad - a truth that cut to the quick of Hannibal's grief.

When he winced, Will noticed.

"What's wrong?" he asked, taking another step forward. He hesitated for a moment; then reached out, and gave his forearm a light squeeze. "You seem troubled."

Hannibal furrowed his brow. Despite Will's devastating betrayal, Hannibal had not yet moved on from welcoming his touch. Still, it was out-of-character for Will to initiate any sort of physical contact. Although Hannibal now possessed a clear understanding of how deeply embroiled his secret adversary was in the art of deception, he wondered just how far Will was willing to go.

With his free arm, Hannibal gestured around the room. "I'm standing in my office for perhaps the last time. It's a sobering reality."

Will maintained a loose grip on his sleeve. "Give yourself permission to feel it," he suggested.

Hannibal glanced at Will's hand. "Feel what?"

"The grief." His eyes locked into Hannibal's. "You're losing the security of the life you've made for yourself here."

"But we'll start a new one." Hannibal reminded him. There was a bitter taste in his mouth. "Have you forgotten that this is also your last night as a free man?"

Will didn't speak, but pressed Hannibal's arm again before he released him and fixed his gaze on a point across the room. His eyes were growing vacant.

Hannibal tightened his mouth. "Tomorrow will demand a special amount of preparation. Best to rejuvenate your body with a good nights' rest. I can't force you to stay over, but I must insist you leave shortly if you still intend to drive."

Will stared at his feet, unmoving. His eyelids started to droop. "Maybe I shouldn't have taken that shot."

Hannibal gestured toward the door. "Shall I see you out?"

Will suddenly yawned. "I'm exhausted."

"Why don't you lie down, then?" Hannibal invited him. He gestured toward the chaise lounge. "Please."

Will opened and closed his eyes; then stumbled, almost tripping over his feet. "I have to get home."

"You really shouldn't drive," Hannibal insisted. He made sure to stay close to Will's side in case he fell.

"I can't stay," Will mumbled, nearly incoherent. His eyelids fluttered. "Otherwise, I might..."

Hannibal caught him before he hit the ground. The eszopiclone he slipped into Will's drink had kicked in quickly. Admittedly, this breach of protocol went against his normal plan of attack. He greatly preferred organization to chaos. Murder was a meticulous affair - not a messy one. This catastrophe, however, cut him deeply. Will had deceived him; killed his dream of family by bringing the scent of the irreverent redhead into his home uninvited.

Wrinkling his nose in disgust, Hannibal dispelled the sensory image of Freddie Lounds' hair and returned his attention to Will, checking beneath his eyelids; listening to his pulse for a few moments. Satisfied that his patient was in stable condition, he heaved Will's unconscious body over his shoulder. Will's bulk was solid, though he was lighter than Hannibal had expected. Gripping the backs of Will's toned thighs, he briefly entertained the notion of infusing them with rosemary and saffron before roasting them.

He carried Will to the chaise lounge and quietly laid him down; throwing a passing glance in the direction of the door. He didn't want to awaken Abigail's curiosity, though he doubted she would attempt to investigate any strange sounds. She had a better idea now of what he was capable. *Although*, he thought, a little sadly, *she has little idea of how far I'm willing to go.*

Gently, he deposited Will onto the chaise lounge and straightened his arms and legs. Will exhaled softly through his mouth. Hannibal was mesmerized, thinking he could stop Will's breath forever at any given moment...but his murderous thoughts had no place in the present. Before he could allow the indifference to take hold, he needed to complete his mission.

With that thought in mind, he strode over to the desk and rifled through stack of paper. After a few seconds, he located his rendering of *Achilles Lamenting the Death of Patroclus*. He paused when he beheld it again. Despite a few minor discrepancies, the Patroclus in his drawing resembled both Nikolay Ge's original work of art and the version of Will Graham who had so bewitched him. It was one of his best executions yet. Delicately, he plucked the drawing from the stack and carried it over to the chaise lounge.

The fading firelight illumined the scene before him. Stopping a few paces short of where Will lay sleeping, Hannibal drank in the imagery with all of his senses. He downloaded all the minute details into his mental hard drive, to revisit in the future if the urge ever found him. The grieving side of him doubted he would ever retrace his footsteps back to this moment. The memory might become too much to bear.

Closing his eyes, he walked forward the last few steps, not needing to see. He took another deep whiff of smoky wood, the acrid burning in his nostrils mingling with the musk of Will's slightly perspiring skin. Tonight, he had inexplicably traded the usual cheap ship-bottle cologne in favor of an earthy-sweet scented soap. Hannibal inhaled again, and discerned the fragrance was ambergris. An uncommon scent in itself, he was even more surprised that Will was wearing it.

He finally took my advice, and chose something that suits him.

Hannibal started to smile, but then the reminder of Will's betrayal hit him hard, and he inwardly reeled from the power of that punch to the gut. Savagely, he wished for Will to experience the pain he felt - but in a literal way. His eyes flew open.

"No," he said aloud, startling himself. He realized his breathing had become shallow. His throat felt tight, constricted. Swallowing hard, he closed his eyes, willing himself to relax. The persistent absence of his control alarmed him. Will had committed an act of betrayal more treacherous and Machiavellian than Hannibal had ever deemed possible. Still, he must properly mourn the loss of his companion - that was what Dr. Du Maurier would doubtless advise.

Hannibal looked between Will and his drawing, comparing them again. "A convincing likeness." His gaze focused on Will's torso. "Except for a few important details."

Removing Will's shoes and socks, he set them beside the chaise lounge and then redirected his attention towards completing the tableau. He took his time unbuttoning Will's shirt, caressing Will's firm chest beneath the material with soft fingertips. A slow disrobing was appropriate, given the drama of the situation. As he gently worked Will's shoulders out of his shirt sleeves, Hannibal watched his bare chest rose and fell with each breath, unencumbered by the weight of conscious thought; nestled in the blissful peace of deep sleep.

Unbuckling Will's jeans, Hannibal slid them over his hipbones and pulled them down, working them free of his ankles. After he had folded them neatly and placed them next to Will's shirt, he checked him for signs of emerging consciousness. There were none to be found. Briefly, he hesitated before removing Will's boxers. Had Will remained loyal to him, this scenario would not have entered the realm of possibility. He had always done whatever necessary to perpetuate his freedom. Hypotheticals and obsessive love were not enough, however, to save Will Graham from his fate.

With that thought in mind, Hannibal divested Will of his boxers. The living image of Patroclus lay before him like an unwrapped gift. With a quiet gasp, he sat in awe, rendered motionless by Will's physical perfection. Hannibal memorized the shape of his body; the subtleties of his even features; the vibrant color of his skin. He was mesmerizing, unforgettable: an Adonis amongst mere mortals.

"Beautiful," Hannibal whispered. He stroked Will's loose curls. "Pity you will never see yourself as the masterpiece you really are."

After several moments of fully appreciating the artistry of Will's nude form, Hannibal covered Will's nakedness with the white sheet he had set aside exactly for this purpose. His eyes swept over Will's bare shoulders, across his chest, and downward, where the thin line of hair trailed from his naval, down to his well-proportioned attributes.

The sheet had slipped down a little too far, exposing more of him than the tableau warranted. Narrowing his eyes, Hannibal adjusted the fabric, making sure to get angle correct. No matter how the pleasing shape of Will's body parts might be, it was best they remain covered. Any hopes he might have entertained about exploring the empath under more intimate circumstances died the moment he scented Freddie Lounds' offensively floral odor on him.

Hannibal grimaced. "I must tip my hat to you, Will. Hiding your deception behind my besotted blindness was a near-perfect ruse."

He had allowed him inside, but now, Hannibal's only hope of self-preservation was the total excision of Will Graham's influence from his heart and mind. The fire flickered higher, casting more shadows across the scenery. Eyes shuttered tightly in slumber, Will smiled faintly in his sleep. Hannibal wondered if Will was dreaming about anticipated triumph of tomorrow's big catch - the victory he thought was a forgone conclusion.

Hannibal touched Will's hand. His palm was warm; his fingertips cool. Briefly, Hannibal squeezed them. His mind spun with the enormity of the loss looming before him. Will's wasted potential cut especially close to his pride. However much the man had betrayed him, Hannibal knew the bond they shared was real. Will had chosen the wrong course of action, but the look in his eyes tonight - and many nights - was ever conflicted.

"Why didn't you choose to come away with me instead?" he murmured. "I would have kept us all safe."

The pulse in Will's abdomen throbbed, inviting Hannibal to take a closer look.

"You have sinned in hubris, Will," he softly accused. "Let the punishment fit the crime. But first," he murmured, focusing all of his attention on the living art before him, "I shall bid you a proper farewell."

Releasing his hand, Hannibal cupped Will's chin, lifting his head back to approximate the same angle as Patroclus' in the drawing. Will's breathing remained steady and nearly silent. If Hannibal paid close enough attention, he could hear small shivers of air escaping. The dancing firelight flattered the definition in his chest and arms. Will's torso rippled with goosebumps in the chilly air. His nipples were hard little pebbles that accented the slight rounding of his chest. Hannibal paid close attention to the subtle contours of Will's body near his pelvic bones. Chiseled definition, though not overly so, and still looked invitingly soft; masculinity incarnate.

In his head, Hannibal heard an achingly tender soprano voice singing "Mild und leis," the final aria in *Tristan und Isolde*.

Seht ihr's nicht? the Isolde of his mind sang, exquisite in her mourning. *Do you not see?*

The string section climbed higher; urgently seeking to release their tremulous melody accompanying the soprano's effortless trill.

Isolde's otherworldly voice intensified inside the auditorium of Hannibal's mind palace; singing the lyrics he had long-ago indoctrinated.

As from lips so joyfully mild,

Sweet the breath that softly stirs

Echoes.

He stared at Will's mouth, relaxed and partly open.

As they swell and murmur round me,

Shall I breathe them, shall I listen?

Hannibal pressed his head against the empath's chest, inhaling his rich scent. His neatly-manicured nails traced the ridges of Will's hips. The skin was smooth and unblemished here; not like the puckered bullet hole scar in his shoulder that marred the otherwise prostine flesh.

Shall I sip them, plunge beneath them?

Lightly, he ran his palms across Will's firm belly, searching for the exact location where he wanted to carve an entrance.

In the billowy surge;

In the gush of sound...

His hands danced along Will's abdomen, noting where his pulse was strongest - noticing an extra rush of blood at his touch. He focused on Will's lower right abdominal quadrant, tracing a path of future destruction across his warm flesh with quivering fingers.

To drown now, sinking...

Hannibal's hands shook a little. He buried his face into the curve of Will's waist, grasping his hips tightly: enraptured by grief and the beauty before him - past caring if his captive awoke or not.

Unconscious, void of all thought.

Defenseless Will Graham would not be worth the risk destroying. But capable, cunning Will Graham? The Will Graham who had managed to deceive Hannibal Lecter must accept his punishment and pay for his crimes. Before he took his last breath, Hannibal would be at his side; absolving him of sin.

Highest bliss...

He dragged his hands up higher, to where Will's heart steadily manufactured beats. Trembling with emotion, he laid his head on Will's chest; enthralled by the gorgeous melody within the hollow cavity.

Desire!

In his mind's eye, Isolde took her lover's hand; together, they departed to the next realm, forever free of their mortal confines, side by side again at last; celebrating their joyous reunion.

Hannibal kissed the skin above Will's heart. Despair, an emotion he had managed to elude for years, fell heavily upon him. The pit of his stomach ached. His eyes were bright with tears as

his pulse raced, an insistent reminder of his unhinged state. Anger was not far behind grief.

For the moment, however, he could only embrace the tragedy of circumstance; and weep soundlessly in anticipatory mourning.

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He was dreaming; or he was awake. Will honestly didn't know which was true. He wasn't wearing clothes, but he didn't feel cold. Lights and colors were drowned in waves of sound. A man's head rested on his chest. Dazed, he fingered a smooth strand of hair belonging to...

Hannibal?

Will squinted. His vision was hazy, unreliable. The walls seemed to breathe. Softly, he groaned.

"You're not awake, Will," the person who sounded like Hannibal said.

Nothing made any sense - he had awoken into an alternate universe in which the laws of reality did not apply. The head disappeared from his chest. A cool puff of air swept over his skin where the warmth had been.

"Our time together grows short."

Time...what's that?

He still didn't know if he was awake. Reaching up, he touched what felt like a man's face: rough top layer; soft skin beneath. A hand tipped his chin back. Will strained his eyes, attempting to discern the features close to his own, but they kept shifting. He glimpsed a flash of the hybrid's cold sneer before Hannibal's face settled into his vision.

His eyes sucked Will into their dark depths. "Don't worry. You won't remember this."

Remember what? he tried to ask.

Before he could form the words, Hannibal kissed him - angry, greedy; urgent and unrestrained. Will froze like caught prey, unmoving and asphyxiated. In a frenzy of passion, Hannibal continued devouring his lips. Salt that tasted like sorrow hung heavy on his tongue: hot, wet; wanton.

Will gasped for breath. With an arm that seemed to weigh a hundred pounds, he reached up to push his assailant away. Hannibal stilled his objection with the intoxicating slide of his tongue. Tracking a damp trail inside Will's mouth, the doctor tasted his conquest; hungrily impeding the empath's intrinsic protest. His skilled ministrations rapidly coaxed reciprocation.

Will knew he must be dreaming when Hannibal bit his bottom lip, and he instantly craved the sensation again. His hands, acting of their own volition, grabbed Hannibal's hair to pull him closer. An ache bloomed deep inside his center. Dragging his heavy digits through the light-

colored strands faintly held within his grasp, Will's desire to escape warred with his want to continue. He felt afraid.

Hannibal shuddered and rocked his hips forward. Stiff heat ebbed and throbbed in time to his harried pulse. Pushing his clothed body against Will's nakedness, he grew thick with need.

"*See*," he urged in a husky voice.

A moment flashed by; and then the hybrid stared back at Will, seething with lascivious rage. Digits like spiked claws pinched him in place. Sharp, sudden pain awakened his dulled senses, culminating into excruciating pleasure. Will saw ten replicas of his nightmare writhing at once.

Come closer, they all moaned in sync.

He experienced each jerk of lust as if he were the infiltrator. His own shameful arousal was distant in comparison to Hannibal's, but it was still horrifically present. He stared into Hannibal's eyes, looking for answers. The reptilian orbs warped into pools of brown-black blood.

"Feel it," Hannibal ordered. His relentless passion demanded compliance.

A wave of shock swept through Will's numbed body as he felt himself respond to the sultry command. The ache between his legs exuded unbearable pressure, and his nerves screamed with tension. His pelvis undulated back and forth into a steadily-increasing rhythm he reluctantly understood. Will realized he was unable to stop the inevitable plunge into climactic ecstasy. Despite disbelieving reality, he could no longer escape his own mind's unraveling. Repulsion and arousal were one and the same; the last wall between them had disintegrated into dark desire.

Hannibal pressed his nose to Will's cheek; fervently scenting him.

"I love you, Will," he confessed in a broken whisper that sounded far too *human*.

Seeking no alternate truth, Will closed his eyes, and twined his fingers more tightly into Hannibal's hair - thus rendering returning to reality an impermanent impossibility.

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Past 8 AM, he awoke in his own bed, with no memory of how he had gotten there; not even the slightest recollection of the night's events after the point when a bone-deep exhaustion had claimed his consciousness. A vague feeling of unease crept inside him as he pondered the hidden context within the cryptic, handwritten note Hannibal had left on the nightstand...

Tonight.

Excision

Chapter Summary

Hannibal enacts his bloody revenge, but the aftertaste of his victory is bitter.

The rain almost masked the sound of the cab pulling up outside. Hannibal sighed in a mixture of relief and regret. He had loved and lost twice over tonight, but the most difficult parting was yet to come. Exhausted from his brutal fight with Jack, and weary from his dealings with Alana, Hannibal allowed himself a fraction of a moment's rest before preparing himself to administer Will's well-deserved punishment. Though he tried to clear his mind in order to prepare for the task at hand, there was a part of him that yet resisted the thought of a world without the empath's beautiful mind to brighten his day; a world without his stunning face to smoulder in Hannibal's memory palace during another restless night.

The real tragedy was that he had wanted it - that elusive, long-sought *soul* connection - more than he had ever expected; more than he even knew himself. Somehow, Will had glimpsed behind the mask and stirred something within him even Hannibal didn't realize existed. Conspiring with Jack and Alana was bad enough, but tricking Hannibal into believing he had finally found a family was unforgivable. Will had provoked his humanity.

Tears diluted with blood streamed down his cheeks. He licked his newly-bruised lips; remembering how Will had tasted last night. That hint of cinnamon embellishing the burn of the liquor beneath; the soft heat of their tongues entwining; every moment of their brief embrace was exhilarating - a perfect passion, excepting the bitter aftertaste of Will's betrayal. Hannibal almost wished that he had resisted his impulse to ravish Will during his brief semi-lucid state. Had he never opened up that Pandora's box, he would never have known what he would inevitably miss, once their ill-fated courtship became but an echo of the past.

Will's footsteps sounding across the threshold strengthened his diminishing resolve. The linoleum knife he had chosen to use as his means of gutting Will nearly cut the palm of his filthy hands when he gripped it too tightly. Panting; shaking with adrenaline, Hannibal did his best to ignore his severe aches and pains. To avoid unnecessary self-injury, he pointed the curved blade down and lowered it to his side; keeping it out of immediate view.

"Goodbye, Jack," Hannibal whispered through the pantry door. He thought he heard Jack groan in response.

"Thanks for the heart-to-heart." As noiselessly as his battered body would allow him, he crept away from the pantry, leaving Jack behind to bleed out, if he hadn't already.

A flicker of movement in his peripheral vision informed him he had company. Abigail stood in the shadows, trembling with the aftermath of her confrontation with Alana. The shocked

expression on her face clearly betrayed her confusion and terror. Although she had successfully done his bidding by incapacitating Alana, Hannibal felt nothing for her now. She was but a pawn in his failed strategy to possess Will Graham. Now that Will's true intent had come to light, he had little use for the prize intended to award him for his devotion.

Will advanced into the kitchen with a fearful look on his face. His gun was drawn. Hannibal felt his heart further disintegrate when he remembered how much time they had spent together in that room. Only a short while ago, he was teaching Will culinary tricks, trading witty banter, and thinking about how to get closer. Now, the object of his obsession was openly hunting him.

Hannibal grimaced. Had his false apprentice been honest with his intentions from the start, no one else in their social circle would have needed to fear death - least of all, Will. Hannibal knew instinctively he would have let him go, had he kept his integrity intact.

Don't lie to me, Will had demanded when he had first resumed therapy.

Will you return the courtesy? Hannibal remembered asking. It occurred to him now that Will never had answered his question.

"Abigail?" Will's shocked voice brought him back to the present.

In all those months of planning, he had kept his vision of Will's surprised joy at seeing Abigail alive as a mental delicacy he could savor and inspire him to keep biding his time until the right moment arrived. Now, as Will a few feet in front of him, not yet having noticed the danger of his presence, Hannibal no longer cared to cherish the confused relief he must feel as he realized Abigail yet lived.

Abigail's eyes were huge. "I didn't know what else to do, so I just did what he told me."

"Where is he?" Will asked.

Hannibal advanced upon them, not bothering to hide the faint sound of his footsteps. A slight stiffening of Will's shoulders gave away his swift awareness of Hannibal's presence.

"You were supposed..." Will stuttered, distressed, "...to leave."

Slowly, he turned around. The raw disbelief in his eyes took Hannibal aback. He wished he could relish it more, but the traumatic end of his obsession with Will Graham was still ongoing.

"We couldn't leave without you," he replied. It was only too true.

Unable to stop himself, Hannibal reached forward and caressed the side of Will's face. His skin was cold and damp from the rain. Hannibal cupped the shell of his ear; stroking his wet hair. He kept his pulse was steady, but when Will leaned into his touch, expressing his regret without words, Hannibal could wait no longer. The moment of reckoning had come; he must harken its call, lest he fall prey to Will's appeal again and subsequently lose his freedom.

Comprehension only dawned in Will's eyes the split second before the linoleum knife in Hannibal's hand found its target. Without hesitation, Hannibal plunged a path of destruction across Will's right side, digging and twisting, plunging the blade deeply enough to sever tissue and arteries and organs. He grunted with abrupt pleasure. Cutting into the untouched cavity of Will's body, was both profoundly satisfying and emotionally excruciating. Wrist-deep inside the new opening he had carved, Hannibal savored Will's startled exhalations of pain. Streaming spurts of blood saturated the lower half of his shirt. He sharply inhaled when the hot fluid soaked the front of his pants.

I would have honored you, he thought. *Worshiped you*. He wrenched the knife free of Will's insides. B*ut you deceived me*.

Overcome with the irrevocable nature of his own actions, Hannibal embraced him, pouring all of his miserable affection into their last moments together. Even now, during the height of his revenge, he still sought to comfort his former muse when the revelation of his imminent demise flashed across his stricken features. Death was coming for him soon. Ravishing as he had never been before, gasping and panting for breath, excreting blood and sweat and tears, Will Graham was the incarnation of perilous beauty.

Hannibal spoke to him in a low, calm voice, stroking his head, his hair, feeling the curves of his back and waist and trying to soften his shudders of pain. When Will started to slip on his own blood, Hannibal held him up, keeping him from falling just yet. The disappointment of witnessing his dreams shattering in front of him was almost too much to bear, but he was determined to stay the course until only silence reigned supreme.

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A hard blow to the right side of Will's abdomen was not enough to make him grasp exactly what was happening- until his hand shot out reflexively to feel his side. As his fingertips disappeared inside the gaping wound, and the bright-hot agony accompanied his touch, he understood the gravity of his injury. Hannibal's knife stopped short. The pain was so sudden and shocking that for an instant, all he felt was a burst of cool where his abdomen gaped open, revealing jumbled bits of fat and sinew and bowel. A crushing pressure followed, and Will instinctively pushed back against it; comprehending on a primal level that his guts were literally falling out with the aid of gravity to quicken the process.

Abigail's gasp of horror was a faraway sound.

Wracked with spasms of searing pain, Will fell into Hannibal's arms. The pain in his gut burned deeper. Hannibal's face was very near his own; his embrace, oddly soothing. Tears prickled at the corners of Will's eyes. Through agonized shudders, he felt the blistering sting of betrayal, and the black anger that accompanied it. Absurdly, he felt a simultaneous flash of guilt through the thick fiery pain in his stomach, and he struggled to hold in his intestines. His knees buckled. Holding onto Hannibal with the waning strength left inside him, Will started to convulse. Cold blended with heat; dribbled down his back and front - a river of blood.

Hannibal stroked his hair, hugging him tightly as his body shook uncontrollably.

"Time did reverse. The teacup that I shattered did come together."

Hannibal spoke calmly into his ear, his voice terrible in its lack of inflection. "The place was made for Abigail in your world. You understand?"

He didn't. Distantly, he heard Abigail's soft sobs. For a moment, Hannibal held him tighter. Will could feel all the hard contours of Hannibal's body; hot, slick heat molded to him. Their embrace provided the absolution he hadn't known he needed until this moment. Will clutched him closer; their bodies briefly inseparable. Feeling Hannibal's raw anguish at this close range was almost more painful than the grievous wound in his belly.

"The place was made for all of us," Hannibal said softly, "Together."

He grasped Will's face. His voice fairly shook: "I wanted to surprise you."

Despite the liquid fire raging through Will's unzipped abdomen, it hurt to hear Hannibal's pain.

"And you..." Hannibal said bitterly, "You wanted to surprise me."

As Hannibal released started to release him, Will clung to him a moment longer. He knew once Hannibal let him go, the relative certainty of an agonizing death would not be far ahead of him.

A fitting punishment for a traitor, he heard the hybrid hiss in the part of his brain that wasn't malfunctioning yet.

Hannibal pried him off and deposited him onto the floor. Will curled into a semi-fetal position, clutching the remnants of his torn flesh together. Viscera protruded through the gaps between his blood-drenched fingers.

"I let you know me, see me. I gave you a rare gift," Hannibal said. The anguish in his voice rose, even as his voice remained steady. "But you didn't want it."

"Didn't I?" Will gasped. He had wanted it more than his own life.

"You would deny me my life."

Black bursts of pain injected Will's jumbled thought process. He responded to Hannibal's continued interrogation about his deception from a faraway part of his brain. "No, no - not your life."

"My freedom then - you would take that from me. Confine me to a prison cell."

Will could not deny that.

"Do you believe you could change me?" He peered more closely at Will. "The way I've changed you?"

"I already did," he managed to reply with a stricken grin. The look of surprised hurt on Hannibal's face was unforgettable. Will tried to laugh, but moaned instead as his severed abdominal muscles attempted to contract.

"Fate and circumstance have returned us to this moment when the teacup shatters."

Reality grew scarcer, but he held onto it, still fighting for consciousness. Hannibal continued to utter dreadful truths as Will felt himself slipping into the greyness of unawareness.

"I forgive you, Will."

Pain was blessedly more distant. Then, Hannibal asked, "Will you forgive me?"

Colors brightened again, in horrific, super-saturated detail. He knew all too well what Hannibal would do to dig the proverbial knife in deeper. Will weakly protested, powerless to stop him as Hannibal called their surrogate daughter to his side, weapon still in hand.

Holding Abigail firmly within his grasp, Hannibal looked into Will's eyes; making sure he was watching. History began to repeat itself as the blood-flecked knife pressed against the entrance scar left behind by Garret Jacob Hobbs on that long-ago afternoon when Will and Hannibal had saved her life.

"No, no, NO! Don't!"

Hannibal ripped open her neck without even flinching, then released her to the ground. Arterial blood gushed from raw wound; erupting from her slit throat in time to the throbbing of her pulse.

Groaning in sheer anguish, Will stared up into Hannibal's eyes.

Why? he asked without speaking - though he already knew the answer.

Hannibal bent down next to him. Once more, his eyes drew Will into their glittering depths. "You can make it all go away. Put your head back..."

Will didn't want to hear anymore, but he was too weak to protest.

Hannibal's gaze was resolute. "Close your eyes..."

When Death comes, will you surrender? the hybrid sneered inside his mind.

Will silently implored Hannibal to show mercy. He refused, though his voice wavered: "Wade into the quiet of the stream."

"No," Will gasped.

Hannibal's eyes, deeply disappointed, lingered on him a moment longer.

The next thing Will knew, he was watching Hannibal walk away. His heavy footfalls faded into the rain as he exited the front door; leaving Will and Abigail to fate.

Whimpering, Will used the last ounce of his strength to propel himself towards Abigail. Reaching one badly shaking hand towards her, he attempted to put pressure on the wound in her neck, but the fire in his gut was too searing to leave exposed to the open air for long. On a deeper level than the sensation of his own suffering, he understood that Abigail was beyond his help. He had made a fatal misstep. Hannibal had seen him coming, and punished both of them for his deception.

It's my fault - I condemned her to death.

He had come to Hannibal's tonight, not only out of desperation to save Jack, but also because of his own morbid curiosity. He had Hannibal to thank for fostering co-dependency, but only himself to blame for his lack of foresight. His mind flashed to the huge pool of dark red blood he had seen under the pantry door as he first walked in. Jack was probably already dead, or close to it. Will didn't have the strength to call out to him. The air was filled with the scent of fresh carnage. It was becoming harder to breathe. Will took in small, gasping sips, dismayed to feel the mangled remains of his innards fluttering upon exhalation.

It was too painful to glance in Abigail's direction again. He did it anyway. At once, he wished he hadn't. His eyes filled with tears. Abigail lay motionless as the gaping slit in her neck pumped weakening spurts of arterial blood onto the slippery floor. Through the stupor of his pain, he was still able to register that she was nearly gone - if not already dead. He had been reunited with his surrogate daughter; now, he was losing her all over again. Alana, the third innocent victim, was just outside the front door, dying in the rain. Will's eyes filled with salty-hot tears as he imagined her lonely, pointless death.

The blood-puddle beneath his cheek grew cooler; stickier. Soon, it would coagulate. He wondered if the paramedics would find him with his face stuck to the floor. He wondered if the Feds would have a tough time wrenching his corpse free of the gore. He could almost hear the morbid jokes some of them would make. One of them might be too green around the gills to handle such a bleak display of total carnage. He hoped a rookie would not taint the crime scene by vomiting onto his corpse.

Will sensed his impending loss of consciousness. The room started to sway, and change in depth and size. He wished his soul could escape body. He could do as Hannibal suggested. He could close his eyes, and wade into the quiet of the stream. There, he might find peace.

You really don't know if you're going to survive him, do you?

The memory of Freddie Lounds' words hit him with painful clarity. Now, it really was too late to change to past. The teacup was forever shattered; never to be carefully reconstructed again. Hannibal's influence had proved more powerful than he had ever imagined. He was foolish for thinking he could outwit the monster who had mastered the art of empathetic coercion.

Will grimaced, regretting his folly with every shallow breath; every beat of his weakening heart. A rope of intestine slipped between his fingers and came to rest on floor. He was too weak to push it back into his body. The numbness grew heavier, and he waited for the curtain of death to close.

He felt the stag's presence; then glimpsed the creature lying on its side, its breathing labored. Before he closed his eyes, he watched the stag take its last breaths. As the river of blood beneath him rose higher, the world as he knew it faded to black.

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The passenger plane soared through the clouds, bearing Hannibal in the direction of the unknown; a world without Will Graham. He briefly wondered if Will had somehow survived. Jack. Alana. Abigail. Will. If any of them survived - doubtful, but still possible - they would emerge as changed people. He shook his head as if to clear it. Thoughts like that weren't healthy. He needed to move on in order to avoid getting caught. Staying tangled in the web of the past would only serve to cheapen his personal sacrifices.

Give yourself permission to feel it, Will had told him after their last supper together. How the empath's advice so often echoed his own - but playing the role of Judas Iscariot had proved to be Will Graham's fatal apotheosis.

Liebestod.

Grief appeared, and he allowed it inside. A penetrating sadness enshrouded him. Despondent, Hannibal gazed out the plane window as Dr. Du Maurier slept beside him.

"Will," he said softly, unable to resist speaking his name. Though he had left the past behind in Maryland, he felt the severance of his bond to Will as deeply as if his heart had been cut in two. Hannibal sighed. He could piece his shattered vision of the future back together, but it was overwhelming to comprehend the gravity of the losses he had incurred along the way.

"'This is the fate of fools, though they are remembered as being wise,'" he murmured, focusing his gaze on the horizon. Despite his resolve to leave the past behind, a corner piece of Hannibal Lecter's heart remained permanently fractured by the aching memory of Will Graham's charming smile.

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Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Simuel alete.
Together forever.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

An ancient yew tree stood in the middle of a frozen wasteland Will didn't recognize. Frigid wind whipped against him. Icy grains of sleet scoured his features; harsh, astringent. When he rubbed his eyes in attempt to clear them, a black shape arose from the swirling whiteness. It was the telltale figure of the hybrid.

Inches away, the creature stood still, assessing him. Though Will couldn't discern its eyes in the murky moonlight, he nevertheless felt their weight upon him. A pressure grew inside him, starting behind his eyes, spreading downward; traveling quickly. It filled his gut, hasty to push its grasping tendrils deeper inside. The creature's malevolence was a powerful entity of its own.

Reaching forward, the hybrid forced him against the yew tree's thick roots.

I gave you a choice, it hissed. *The hourglass is empty. Where do your loyalties lie*?

He stared up at the creature, accepting his fate. "I thought I knew, but I was wrong."

An unwise response. Never-ending blackness lent no reflection to its unworldly eyes.

"I'm not afraid of you anymore," Will declared. He looked straight into the depths of its soul.

The hybrid stared back.

My dear boy, it chuckled, *you never were.*

Pinning him against the rough bark, the beast partly trapped him inside the tree's hidden entrance. Its ebony claws caught on Will's shirt as it dragged the fabric upward, exposing his bare skin. He felt a sharp pinch of pain as fingers like talons scratched greedy lines across his flesh.

I've longed to divest you of this charming person suit. *You are a most beautiful weapon of destruction.*

The hybrid's heat enveloped him, though he felt ever colder. Shivering, he closed his eyes and willed himself one last time to wake.

To take your gifts away from the world would be a special privilege.

The ebony monster wearing Hannibal's face seemed to smile at him.

And, oh, it whispered inside him, rattling his core. *How the living shall mourn your loss*.

"What are you waiting for?" Will challenged. "Kill me."

With a bloody kiss, the hybrid claimed him. Will offered no resistance, not when the beast dug one razor-tipped talon into his midsection, nor when he removed it from his open belly to spread the gore from his entrails onto his cheek – not even when he felt his last breath leave his lungs. The hybrid kissed him again: this time deeper, needier; all-consuming—teeth, lips, tongue: flesh-to-flesh, bound by blood; as one at last.

Simuel alete.

"Together," Will gasped into the hybrid's gaping orifice. As he struggled for breath, the sharp teeth tearing open his mouth became blunt; thin, hard lips became pliable. The hybrid's corpse-cold tongue became warm and inviting.

Will opened his eyes; unsurprised to glimpse the human face of the devil who knew him better than he knew himself.

"Forever," Hannibal Lecter murmured against his lips. Blood and saliva mingled between them like lovers. Gently, Hannibal's tongue skimmed Will's swollen bottom lip.

"Mine."

In the end, darkness embraced him; just as Will had always known it would.

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Chapter End Notes

It has been my utmost pleasure sharing my word art with you. In the case that you appreciated my interpretation of HANNIBAL, please let me know. In the case that you didn't, I'm glad you at least gave this story a chance. At any rate, I'm eager for Season 3 like Hannibal's eager for Will Graham's scent, and I simply cannot wait to see how Bryan Fuller & Company are going to torture us next.

My readers are everything - you are my anchor, my paddle - hell, the whole damn boat. Thank you for your existence. As evidence of my deep appreciation, I'm gifting you a

sequel: *Skin to Skin*, which I will construct around the storyline of Season 3. Check out the teaser preview in the next chapter!

Much love,
Jane

End Notes

While reviews are not expected, it would make my day to know whether or not you like my fic. Comments from readers inspire me to continue writing even more than the muse itself.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!